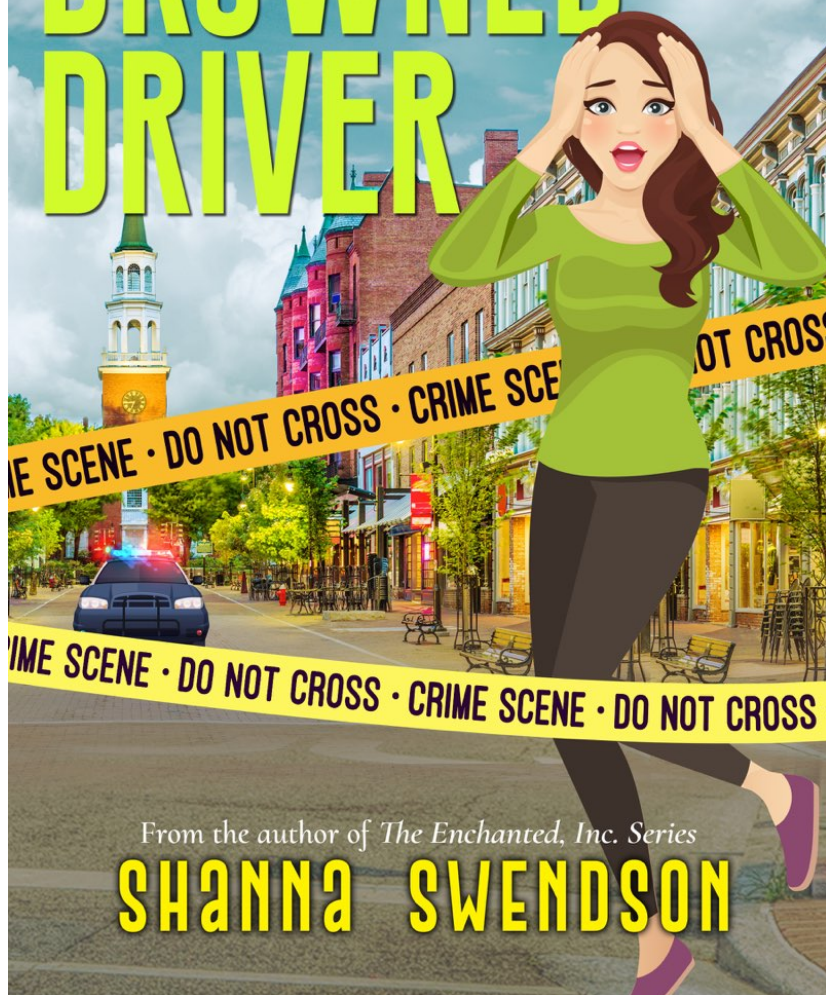


Mystery of the

DROWNED DRIVER



From the author of *The Enchanted, Inc. Series*

SHANNA SWENDSON

Mystery of the Drowned Driver

Shanna Swendson

OceanofPDF.com

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Also by Shanna Swendson

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Chapter One

I dug through my futures file one more time, as though something new might have materialized in the five minutes since I'd last checked. It hadn't. I was in the odd and intensely uncomfortable situation of having no news to cover. Nothing interesting going on means a peaceful life for most people. For a newspaper editor, it's really bad for business.

"Don't worry, Lexie, you're not missing anything," my assistant, Charlene Robinson, said from across the newsroom. "It's always slow around here at this time of year, between the end of school and the start of summer activities."

"It's not just my imagination that nothing at all is going on?" I said, trying to fight the rising tide of despair.

"I think the paper around this time is usually a little light. Keep it to as few pages as possible. Think of it as a break. You just worked really hard on the graduation issue, which was nice and fat."

"Yeah, but there still needs to be *something* in the paper. I can't run nothing but ads. Even the community calendar is almost empty. I'm actually hoping there's something in the police blotter. I'm going to have to profile someone just to have a story at all. I haven't been here long enough to have a stockpile of evergreens to use when I've got a hole, and the entire newspaper is a hole right now."

"Do you have any leftover pictures from graduation? Or the

Memorial Day ceremony?”

“I guess. But that’s old news by now.”

She chuckled. “Not to the people in those pictures. On the bright side, we do have plenty of wedding announcements.”

“Maybe we should just go with it and call it the wedding issue. I could do features on local florists and bridal shops, maybe some fashion photo shoots of wedding attire.” It was a sign of how desperate I was that this idea made my hopes rise.

Charlene shook her head. “Weddings are already pretty much planned by now, and this is the busy time for people involved in that industry. They won’t have time for interviews, and they won’t be interested in ads. The time for your wedding issue is February. Trust me, I’ve married off two daughters and a son. But at the rate we’re going, we might be able to fill an issue with wedding announcements, especially if we make the pictures big enough.”

“I don’t think we can get away with putting those on the front page, unless maybe there are some newsmakers involved. If I put a random bride on the front, then everyone will want to be featured there from now on.”

“Alas, no royal weddings seem to be happening in Stirling Mills.”

“Not even someone who was once some kind of festival queen?”

“Afraid not.”

With a sigh, I turned to the boxes I’d inherited from the former editor that had finally been returned to me after the investigation of his murder. Maybe I’d get inspiration from some of his notes. There had to be *something* to investigate. In fact, that was exactly what I should be doing. This was the perfect time for some investigative reporting. I wasn’t busy with other news, so I had the bandwidth to really dig. All I needed was a story that needed to be delved into.

Before I got the lid of the box open, a woman burst through the wall from the press room. “They found a car in the river!” she

exclaimed.

I was more surprised by the car in the river than by the woman bursting through the wall since the woman was the newspaper's resident ghost, Jean Jacobs, the long-ago editor who still tried to run the newspaper. She'd been less of a pest ever since I got the police scanner and set it up in the press room. She was addicted to listening to the scanner, which gave her a link to the outside world. That got her out of my hair most of the time. I looked at it as a mutually beneficial arrangement. "Anything more than that?" I asked.

"They think there might be someone inside, but they don't know if they're dead or alive because they don't know how long the car has been there. They're scrambling an ambulance, a dive team, and the high-water rescue unit, just in case," Jean said, looking so lit up that she almost seemed alive. "If you get out there now, you'll be sure to be on the scene when they find out."

I was already grabbing my purse. "Where?" I asked on my way to the door.

"On the River Road, just north of the highway."

"Got it. Thanks." Turning to Charlene, I said, "Can you call Rick and see if he can show up there?" He was one of the freelance photographers who took assignments for the paper.

"Will do," she said, already reaching for the phone.

With a mock salute, I said, "You have the helm."

"I have the helm," she replied with an answering salute that was a lot sharper than mine.

An ambulance passed me on my way to the River Road, probably heading to the same place I was going. I was tempted to try to keep up with it, but getting pulled over for speeding would delay me considerably. I wouldn't put it past Wes Mosby, the local cop who more or less ran the police department, to have put one of his guys in place to nab me for speeding just to keep me away from the action. He didn't mind me reporting on things after the fact, but he really hated me getting involved with a case before it was

resolved.

I was perfectly okay with him having to deal with constant disappointment on that front.

The River Road was more than a mile away from anything that looked like a town, but it was technically within the city limits, which put this situation within the jurisdiction of the Stirling Mills police department. I braced myself for the inevitable argument as I came upon the scene, which was pretty hard to miss. I counted four police cars, plus a fire truck and the ambulance that had passed me. I had to stop because a police officer was setting up plastic barricades across the road. Another officer strung yellow crime scene tape from tree to tree on the side of the road next to the river. I parked on the other side of the road, where there was nothing to say I wasn't allowed to be.

I grabbed my phone so I could snap a few pictures of the scene in case Rick didn't get there in time and got out of the car. There didn't seem to be much going on at the moment, just a lot of people in uniform standing around, talking to each other, while others blocked off the scene. The river was in a deep gully, so I couldn't see the sunken car from where I stood. The closest thing to action was one of the firefighters getting into diving gear behind the fire truck. I needed to get a lot closer to be able to get a good picture of that.

I made sure no one was coming up behind me on the road before I crossed, staying on the right side of the barricades. "Hey, Lexie," the cop stringing the police tape said as I approached.

I tried to remember his name. He was too far away for me to read his name plate, and when they were in uniform, most of the cops looked more or less alike. "Hey, Stan," I said, hoping I'd guessed correctly. "Looks like a bit of excitement here."

He didn't take offense or correct me, so I must have got his name right. "Yeah. This one's pretty intense."

"Rescue operation?" I asked.

"Don't know yet."

I skirted the police tape so I could head to the river bank and maybe get a look at the car. I wished I'd thought to change shoes before I'd headed out. I had on flats, but they weren't ideal for trudging through roadside weeds. I made a mental note to start keeping some boots in the trunk of my car.

I didn't have to worry about the weeds or what might be creeping through them for long because a voice called out, "What are you doing here?"

It was Wes, of course. I stopped and turned toward him, giving him a smile that I hoped looked innocent but that probably made me look like I was up to something. He definitely didn't blur together with the other cops. His unruly auburn hair set him apart, as did that little tingle I got when I saw him. It was maddening being attracted to someone who only saw me as a nuisance. "I'm heading to the river," I told him. "I heard there's a car down there and wanted to see it for myself."

"But how did you get here so quickly? We just got here."

"I did tell you about my knack for stumbling across stories."

His eyebrows rose above his sunglasses frames. "Seriously, you just happened to drive down this road right after a car was found in the river? You really are lucky."

I was tempted to let him think that, but I had to admit the truth. "We got a scanner in the newsroom. Jean is addicted to it. And this is likely to be the biggest story around here this week. It's the only thing saving me from having to put a wedding announcement on the front page."

"Well, you won't see anything without crossing into an active crime scene."

"Crime? So you suspect foul play? Are there victims in the car?"

"I can't comment on an active investigation. At the moment, this is still considered a rescue operation. I'll let you know what we found once we know anything. In the meantime, we need the civilians to stay out of the way so we can work."

Since I was the only civilian present, I knew what he really

meant was that he wanted me to stay out of the way, but I ignored that and pressed on for more information. "Rescue implies that there are people in the car."

"We're covering all the possible bases. Now, please step away from the scene, Lex."

"Oh, come on, Wes. You can't tell me *anything*?"

"Your deadline is several days away. You don't have to get the story right this minute. You can wait until we have all the facts. Your only local competition is off for the summer, so it's not as though anyone's going to scoop you."

Annoyingly, he was right. I was used to the pace of a daily newspaper, but the Stirling Mills *Gazette* only came out once a week, and my only competition was the school newspaper, which came out monthly during the school year. I wouldn't lose anything by not getting the story right this moment, as long as I had a photo or two in which it looked like something interesting was happening. I didn't think telling him I was dying of boredom and needed to feel like I was doing *something* would help my case any, so I went back across the road toward my car to watch from there.

The firefighter suited up in dive gear headed toward the riverbank. He disappeared over the edge, and I sighed in frustration. What harm would it do to allow me to watch from up close? Even if I took pictures, it was unlikely I'd be able to show whatever bodies were in the car. I just hoped they let Rick get a little closer when he arrived.

I noticed that there was no crime scene tape on this side of the road. There was nothing stopping me from getting around the barricades from this angle. In fact, if I got to the other side of the ditch, I'd be on private property, and since that property had nothing to do with the accident scene, I didn't think the police could stop me. I'd be trespassing, but I didn't see any houses nearby, so I doubted the property owners were going to object to my presence.

I looked for a relatively clear area and jumped across the ditch.

There were a few feet between the ditch and the barbed-wire fence, and the weeds weren't too high. It looked like this area was mowed pretty frequently. I was able to make it alongside the road until I was directly across from the fire truck. The view of the emergency responders was better there, but I still couldn't see the river. Maybe if I could get past the barricades blocking traffic from the other direction, I could cross the road to get to the river there, and Wes might not catch me.

I ran into a small clump of trees, with a few growing on this side of the fence. It gave me some cover that might help me sneak past, but it made going more difficult. I might have to walk in the ditch. It looked dry, but there was no telling what might be lurking in the tall weeds that grew there.

I grabbed the trunk of a tree and swung around, keeping on the slope of the ditch. I was almost to the next tree when I thought I heard a soft rustling, and I froze. *Please, don't be a snake*, I thought. Maybe it was just a squirrel. A squirrel would be more likely to make rustling sounds in the underbrush. I hoped it was a squirrel, or at least one of the nice snakes. On the up side, if something did bite me, the paramedics were close at hand.

"Get out of here!" a nearby voice shouted. Oh dear, the property owner might be here, after all. Maybe they wouldn't mind me skirting the edge of their land if I explained the situation. I turned in the direction of the voice.

A figure stood among the trees, a woman with her arms crossed over her chest. She wasn't looking toward me, so she must have been angry about something else. I imagined if she wanted to go somewhere, having the road in front of her house blocked off would be a huge inconvenience. Then I realized I could see trees through her. That meant she had to be a ghost. Her clothes—as far as I could tell, given how transparent she was in the afternoon sun—looked relatively recent, so she might be more in touch with the world of the living than a lot of ghosts were, and that meant she might actually know something relevant. I couldn't quote a ghost

in the newspaper, but if this one had seen the accident, it would give me something I could work with to track down more credible information. I moved toward her.

“Did you see what happened?” I asked her softly, hoping my voice didn’t carry to where all the rescuers were.

I wasn’t sure if she heard me or was just ranting when she threw her arms wide and howled, “You deserve to die, you no-good cheat who stole my land! That’ll teach you to leave old ladies alone! Don’t even drive past my property, filthy scum!” As she yelled, her face transformed, melting into a horrible mask of rage. I felt a wave of cold hit me, in spite of the warm weather, and the leaves in the trees stirred, so the effect wasn’t just something that only someone aware of ghosts would notice. She was powerful enough to affect the physical world.

I got an inkling of why the car might have run off the road and landed in the river.

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Chapter Two

In the short time I'd been aware I could see and talk to ghosts, I'd learned that you have to handle them just the right way. If they're still hanging around the world of the living, they're clinging to it for some reason. There are those like Jean who were so devoted to their work or a mission that they can't give up even after death. Others can't move on until they get justice or achieve a goal. Some are just plain stubborn and refuse to admit that they're dead. If you can figure out which category a ghost falls into, you'll know exactly how to handle it. The trick is to figure it out without upsetting it. An upset ghost is generally useless for information, and often kind of scary.

This one was already angry, which made it tricky, but it also meant there was a pretty good chance she fell into the "wanting justice" category, and that meant I had a good idea how to handle her. "You're very angry, aren't you?" I said to the ghost, trying to sound placating without tipping over into patronizing. "Someone has wronged you."

"He took my land! He cheated me."

"Was this your land?" I gestured at the nearby property.

"It was in my family for generations. He told my husband they were going to build factories around us, which would make our land less valuable and bad for us to live on. He offered a good price to sell now, and we could live the rest of our lives in comfort. But he lied. There are no factories, and he sold it for twice what he

offered us, and he didn't even pay us. My husband had a heart attack when he found out. But I'll get him."

My pulse raced with excitement. That definitely sounded like a reason to want to hurt someone from beyond the grave. Ghosts generally can't do a lot to the living. Most people can't see or hear them. But a really riled-up ghost can create wind that blows things around or can make it go cold. I imagined that a ghost flying into a car might be able to distract a driver enough to get him to run off the road. There was a bend in the road and in the river near here, so all the driver had to do was not notice the turn and not be able to stop in time. If the driver was speeding, the accident would be even more likely. I might have solved the case, even before the police found out who was in the car. Unfortunately, it wasn't the sort of solution that could go on record, either with the police or in the newspaper. It would be reported as something like distracted driving, with no mention that the distraction was a ghost.

"Who was it who cheated you?" I asked, then held my breath, waiting for the answer.

"Ryan Dobert. I don't expect you to believe me. But it's true. He lied to us, and he did it all while sounding like our best friend, like he was trying to help us. I always liked that boy, but it turns out he's a snake. And he got away with it, too. That's what we get for believing someone we've known his whole life."

"Ryan Dobert," I repeated, committing the name to memory. I didn't recall running across it in the months I'd been editing the local newspaper.

She turned and shook her fist in the air, shouting, "Get out of here!"

I looked for the object of her ire and saw a car pulling up behind mine. Rick the photographer got out, saw me, and waved. That ended my interview with the ghost, unless I wanted someone I worked with to see me talking to thin air. I doubted the freelancers were aware of the newspaper's unique management structure and the necessary skill for the nominal editor. When I

glanced back toward the ghost, she was gone. Either she'd said all she had to say, or she didn't like crowds.

I made my way back to my car to talk to Rick. "They've got the scene blocked off," I said. "I was trying to approach from the other direction. But maybe they'll let you get closer than they let me go."

"Do you know what happened, who it is?" he asked.

I fought not to glance back to where the ghost had been. "Nope. Only that a car's in the river. They just sent a diver down to see if anyone's in the car and whether or not they're alive."

The firefighter in dive gear climbed up over the edge of the river channel, lifted his mask, and spoke with the others. Rick dashed to the barricade, his camera up to his eye. He had lenses to let him zoom in from this distance, which meant I'd have at least one or two action shots for the paper. The cops and paramedics didn't seem to be doing anything to scramble an urgent rescue after the diver's report, so I got the impression that either the car was empty or its occupant was beyond help.

Was that occupant Ryan Dobert, real estate swindler? I'd assumed the ghost was talking about this specific incident, but that wasn't necessarily the case. Ghosts tended to get frozen in time, fixated on the thing that kept them from moving on. This one seemed to be from relatively recent times, but she still could have been angry about something that happened a couple of years ago, and she was only riled because there were people nearby. Or maybe she stood around and shouted all the time, and I just happened to be nearby to hear her.

When I'd confessed to Wes about being able to talk to ghosts, he'd asked me to let him know if a ghost gave me information about a crime. He couldn't take official action based on the word of a ghost, but it might help him know what to look into. I should probably tell him there was a furious ghost at the scene of this incident who had a very specific grudge.

Then again, it wasn't as though I could have that conversation here. Wes was busy, and I couldn't talk to him about what a ghost

told me in front of the other officers and the rescue crew. I might as well do my own research and learn a little more about what was really going on before I brought Wes in on it. It was entirely possible that what the ghost said had nothing to do with the car in the river, and I wouldn't want to waste Wes's time.

Since Wes wasn't likely to tell me anything until he gave an official statement, and since I trusted Rick to get the photos I needed, I got in my car, turned it around, and headed back to the office. Even if the ghost's complaint had nothing to do with the accident, I still had something to investigate.

WHEN I GOT BACK to the office, both Charlene and Jean were eager to hear what happened and pounced on me as soon as I got through the door. "Were there bodies?" Jean demanded.

"Who was it?" Charlene asked, sounding concerned.

"It was hard to tell, since the car was still in the river, and that's pretty far down in a gully in that stretch," I said. "The police had the whole area roped off, so I couldn't get a good look. They sent down a diver, and they didn't exactly rush into action when he got back to the top, so either there was no one in the car or whoever was in there was definitely dead."

"And you came back here before it was all settled?" Jean said, her hands on her hips. "What kind of reporter are you?"

"I got another tip from another direction that I wanted to look into while the cops were all otherwise occupied and not willing to chat with me. I think I already know who the victim might be, and I have a good idea what killed him."

Jean grinned. "That's more like it. I take it this tip wasn't the sort of thing you could share with the cops."

"I may share it with Wes, eventually. If it pans out."

"Which means your tipster wasn't among the living," Charlene guessed.

“Not in the least. Do you know who owned the land across the road from the river on that big bend just north of the highway?”

She frowned. “I seem to recall that was the old Smith place. They died not too long ago. Was that the ghost you saw?”

“Maybe.” I sat at my desk and ran a search of the archives for “Smith.” It’s a common name but, oddly enough, not that common in this town. I got two obituaries, one for a Charles Smith who died late in the previous year and one for his wife Beth, who’d died two weeks ago. The photo with her obituary looked a lot like the ghost I’d seen. “Yeah, it was Beth Smith,” I said. There wasn’t anything else about either of the Smiths, so if they thought they’d been defrauded, it hadn’t made it into the newspaper. From what I knew about my predecessor, he’d have gone after the slightest whiff of scandal if there was anything at all to it. Maybe there was nothing to what the ghost said. It could have been lingering irrational bitterness. She wouldn’t be the first ghost I’d encountered with a strong grudge.

“Do you know someone named Ryan Dobert?” I asked Charlene. As a native of this town who used to be a teacher, she knew just about everyone.

“You’re not saying he’s who was killed!” she said, aghast. She pressed her hand to her chest, as though trying to calm her heart. It was the sort of reaction I’d expect her to have to news one of her sons had been killed.

“I don’t know,” I said, as gently as I could. If she was this close to Ryan Dobert, I’d have to be delicate about asking her for more information. “Do you know him well?”

“Oh, everyone knows Ryan.”

That sounded like he was merely a prominent citizen rather than someone close to her. “Well, the ghost seemed to think he’d cheated her, and she talked about it serving him right.”

“That can’t be true. I’ve never heard anything bad said about him, and I can’t imagine him cheating anyone. You’re sure the ghost said that?”

“She said his name, and she talked about him lying to her about some real estate deal, telling her and her husband their land was about to be surrounded by factories so they’d sell it, but it turned out not to be true, and he sold it to someone else for nearly double what he paid them.”

“But Ryan isn’t in real estate.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s in business of some sort. I haven’t kept track. I think he’s an entrepreneur, like Jordan Randall, though obviously not as successful.” Jordan was a software tycoon who’d moved back to his hometown after making a fortune in Silicon Valley. I thought of him more as an inventor than an entrepreneur, though I supposed he was really into starting businesses now. “I just can’t see Ryan making anyone so mad that they’d want to kill him from beyond the grave. Everyone likes Ryan. You can’t help it.”

In most places, when someone said something like that, you would just figure it meant he was a nice guy. In Stirling Mills, it made me suspicious. There were a lot of people in this town who had uncanny abilities. Most of them were descended from members of a carnival sideshow that got stranded here during the Depression. Not too long ago, I’d dealt with a case involving descendants of the show’s hypnotist who had a knack for bending people to their will. It had sounded like that hypnotist got around, so maybe he had another descendant who could make people like him while also getting them to do what he wanted. The people in that earlier case had just been trying to keep their family intact, but I could imagine that talent would be really handy for a con artist.

There were other talents that could also affect the way others saw a person, and someone who knew what talent he had and how to use it could do a lot of damage. Therefore, if someone in this town was universally liked to the point that no one was willing to suspect him of a crime, I couldn’t help but wonder what talent he had and what he was up to.

“Do you think this had anything to do with the car in the river?” Charlene asked.

“I don’t know. She might have been talking about the accident. I kind of got the impression she might have caused it.”

“Can ghosts do that?”

“Maybe,” Jean said. “If she’s on a long enough tether to wherever she’s bound to be able to get into the road, she might be able to stir things up enough in the car to make a driver lose control. If she’s mad enough, she might be able to manifest visually so that anyone could spot her, and the driver might wreck by swerving to miss her.”

Charlene shook her head. “I don’t know. There has to be something else going on. Maybe you heard her wrong and she meant someone else.”

It was an unusual enough last name that I seriously doubted that I might have misheard what the ghost said and my misinterpretation happened to be the name of an actual person, but I didn’t think I’d be able to change her mind without evidence, especially if there was something supernatural involved. Instead of arguing, I searched for Ryan Dobert in the archives. Jean drifted through the wall to go back to her scanner, so there was blessed silence in the newsroom, just the clicking of the keys on Charlene’s computer as she wrote up wedding announcements.

I didn’t find a lot of mentions of Ryan in the newspaper. He might have been well-liked, but he hadn’t made a lot of news. He had spoken at a Civic League luncheon a couple of years ago and had been named Entrepreneur of the Year a couple of months before that. The details of what business he was in were vague. It was like he had started a generic “business.” The pictures with those articles showed a man in the ruggedly handsome mold. I pegged him at somewhere in his mid-forties, though his face had the slightly craggy, weathered look of someone who spent a lot of time outdoors—not what I’d expect of an entrepreneur, unless the businesses he started were campgrounds and ski resorts. He

certainly didn't look like a slick wheeler-dealer. I could understand why people might see him as trustworthy and honest. But at least one person didn't.

I'd only spoken to my predecessor once and had never actually met him, but from what little I'd learned about him, it was the sort of thing he'd have been all over. I went back to that box I'd been about to open when Jean alerted me about the car in the river. It looked like Paul Ogden, the former editor, had periodically cleaned his desk by shoving everything in a box. I didn't recall seeing anything about a real estate scam when I'd looked through it after his murder to see if he'd been working on a case that might have made someone want to kill him, but I had different context now, so I might notice something new.

There was no organization to the box. It was a jumble of paper. Most of it looked like trash—junk mail, empty envelopes, newspaper ad inserts—but I had to be careful about dismissing any of it. For all I knew, the ad itself might have been something he'd wanted to investigate, or there might be a cryptic note scribbled on the back of an envelope, like he'd written down something on the nearest piece of paper either when it had occurred to him or when he was on the phone. I had to look at each item carefully.

I spotted the letters *RR* written in pencil on the back of an empty envelope. I'd assumed they meant "railroad," but could it be River Road? The numbers next to the letters could be addresses. I tried plugging that into an online map as an address and got a string of properties on the stretch of road across from where the accident had occurred. Bingo! Ogden must have been looking into something to do with that land. But what had caught his attention? Property sales were in the public record, so I looked that up. All of that land had been sold in the past year, but not to Ryan Dobert. It was a company called El Rio Development. An Internet search on that name brought up a lot of businesses called "El Rio," but nothing with "development" also in the name.

By dinnertime, I hadn't learned much more after running every

search I could think of, and I'd found nothing to connect Dobert to it, but my instincts still told me there was something fishy going on. Even if it had nothing to do with the car in the river, it might be a story. I needed to know more about this Dobert guy and whether he was really that universally liked.

When I needed to take the pulse of the town, the place to go was Margarita's Mexican restaurant down the block. Getting melted cheese and tortilla chips was a lovely bonus to the good gossip. I tried to ration my meals there because I knew that much Tex-Mex food wasn't great for me, but this was a legitimate business outing.

I'd only been in town a few months, but I already felt like a local when I entered the place and was greeted with friendly waves. It took me a few minutes to make my way across the room as I kept getting stopped by people I'd interviewed before who wanted to chat. I'd made a lot of new friends in the spring when I'd helped uncover a burglary ring. I hadn't really been responsible for people getting their family heirlooms back, but I got a lot of credit for it, since that happened after I began writing articles.

I took my usual seat at the bar in the rear of the restaurant, where I could easily talk to Margarita and where I felt less conspicuous eating alone. Usually someone would end up joining me. The place was fairly quiet early on a weeknight, so I was more likely to have a chance to speak with Margarita.

Soon after I sat down, she brought me a small cup that had something red in it and a spoon. "Try this and tell me what you think," she said.

I picked up the spoon and dipped it in the cup. It looked like a chunky tomato soup with maybe some onions, peppers, and tomato on top. I tasted it and found it to be a spicy cold soup. "It's pretty good," I said.

"It's gazpacho. I've been working on a recipe. I thought it might be good to add to the summer menu. My business tends to drop off in hot weather when hot, cheesy, and spicy is less appealing.

Maybe having a few cold items will help.”

I tasted another bite. Now that I knew to expect cold soup, it was growing on me. “Yeah, I think I could see ordering this. And, hey, vegetables. This lowers my dietary guilt levels considerably.”

“I can get most of the ingredients at the farmers’ market, so it counts as locally sourced. I figure it’ll make a good side to tostadas or tacos with guacamole. I’m also working on a salad. Or it might be a hearty salsa. Maybe I can call it summer nachos.”

I was scraping the bottom of the cup with the spoon when Wes came up to the bar. I tried not to get my hopes up. He was one of my frequent dinner partners, if I was in the restaurant early or late enough for it not to be too crowded. At dinner, he was nothing like the way he was at crime scenes, and I definitely preferred Dinner Wes. He was still in uniform, but he sometimes ate on his way home from work. However, he didn’t take a seat and he didn’t acknowledge me, so I got the impression this was Duty Wes. Bummer.

He leaned against the bar and said to Margarita, “Do you have a moment to talk?”

“Yeah, sure. What’s up? Can I get you something?”

“Not now. Do you know Tiffany Burka?”

“She used to work here. Why?”

“Do you know if she knew someone named Tyler Grant?”

“That name doesn’t ring a bell.”

“She never mentioned him?”

“She mentioned that she had a new boyfriend, but I don’t think she said what his name was. Why?”

I thought I knew what it might be about, and if so, I’d been researching the wrong thing entirely because these weren’t the victims I was expecting.

Chapter Three

“I can’t get into specifics right now,” Wes said brusquely.

“What can you tell me about Tiffani’s boyfriend?”

“Not much,” Margarita said, frowning. “We didn’t talk nearly as often once she left here. She went to work at the Old Mill, where the tips are a lot better. I couldn’t blame her, and I wished her well. We stayed in touch sporadically. A few months ago she said she’d met someone. He was a regular customer at the Old Mill, a guy from Dallas who ate there when he was in town on business. He started requesting her section, they chatted, and eventually he asked her out.”

“Did she tell you his name?”

“No. She just said that he was a bit older, but not sugar daddy older. Stable with a good job. She seemed pretty happy. She deserved something good, so I was glad. But that’s about all I know. I didn’t see a lot of her when she started dating him because she spent her days off with him. Sorry. But, really, Wes, what’s this about?”

I hated knowing what was likely going on now that I knew one of the victims was probably her friend. The incident suddenly went from an abstract way to fill space in the paper to something more personal. It was a shocking reminder that real people must have died in that car.

“I can’t say anything official at this time,” Wes said, but he gave me a lingering look. Instead of the warning I would have expected,

I thought it might have been permission, like he wanted me to tell her what I knew as soon as he was gone. He probably couldn't tell her anything until next of kin were notified. "What do you know about her ex?"

She shrugged. "Not much. She didn't talk about him. I just know the marriage was really bad. There was some abuse, possibly more emotional than physical, but still not a great situation. It's been about seven years since they split up, and that was before she came to work here. I remember that he got remarried a few years ago. She was happy for him, sent a gift. I never saw him around here, not even when she first started working here not long after she left him. No stalking or begging her to come back, or anything like that. Was that what you wanted to know?"

"For now. I may need to check back with you later."

"Sure. You know where to find me. Can I get you anything while you're here?"

"No, thanks. Duty calls."

When he was gone, Margarita leaned over the bar and said, "Okay, do you know what that was about? He looked at you like you did."

I hesitated before speaking. I didn't really know anything, and what I did know would only worry her. On the other hand, she was already worried, and her imagination was likely to run wild. The straightforward truth was the best option here, and since I hadn't learned anything directly from Wes, it wasn't as though I was blabbing anything told me in confidence. "I can't be absolutely certain that this is related, but someone found a car in the river earlier today. I don't know if people were in it, or what happened to them if there were people in it."

"Oh, no," she breathed, going pale. "That has to be it. Tiff and the guy were in the car, and that's why Wes was asking questions."

"We don't know that for certain," I said.

"What else could it be? Even if that's not it, Wes wouldn't be asking me questions unless something was wrong. He may not

have the best social skills, but he definitely doesn't just walk up to someone and start asking them questions about people they know unless it's related to something he's working on. Poor Tiff." She blinked rapidly, like she was trying to fight back tears, and shook her head. "And here I am, going on, and I haven't even taken your order yet."

"It's okay. I had the gazpacho, so it's not like I'm starving. Maybe you should sit down for a moment."

"No, let me get your order in, and then maybe I'll join you for a drink."

"I'll go with the soft chicken tacos," I said.

"Okay. Got it." She headed to the kitchen, returning a few minutes later with a tray holding a basket of chips, a cup of salsa, a margarita pitcher, and two glasses. She set it on the bar, then came around the bar to sit next to me and pour drinks for both of us. The town's outdated liquor laws meant she couldn't sell alcohol, but she would occasionally share her namesake beverage with friends, who knew to tip accordingly. It was a handy loophole in the law.

She gulped down half her glass and sighed deeply. She really did look rattled by the news. I would have said Margarita was my closest friend in the town, but I'd never heard of Tiffani. I realized there was a lot I didn't know about Margarita. We talked at dinner if she wasn't too busy, and we'd gone to a couple of movies together, but now that I thought about it, it wasn't really much of a friendship. I was always afraid to ask personal questions, for fear people would think I was working on a story, but the problem with that was that my friendships tended to feel one-sided, like I wasn't truly interested in the other person.

"Is she a close friend?" I asked. "And I'm not interviewing you for the paper. I just figure you need to talk."

"I don't know that I'd say we're close. We probably were while she worked here. When you work in a restaurant, you tend to get tight with your coworkers. You're spending what would be leisure time for most people together at a place other people go for fun, so

it feels like you're hanging out together even if you're working. You're also off at the same time, when nobody else is, so you tend to hang out then, too.

"If something happened to her, it sucks because she was finally getting everything together after going through some really tough stuff. She'd married a guy right out of high school, but it all fell apart when things didn't work out the way he hoped. He was a big football star here and thought he was going places with her there to support him, but the best he could do was walking on at a junior college, and he ended up washing out of the team. She wanted to enroll in college then, but he felt threatened by her doing anything. It apparently got ugly, and she left him. That was when she came to work here. She was the first person not related to me I ever hired, not long after I opened. She didn't have any experience, and I didn't know if I'd sink or swim, so we learned the ropes together. I was proud of her for getting her life in order. She didn't make the mistake a lot of women in that kind of situation make by going right to the next guy to come along. She stayed on her own for a long time."

A waitress brought my tacos, and I realized I hadn't even touched my chips or my drink. I took a sip of margarita and began eating. Margarita didn't need any prodding to continue her story after she sipped at her own drink. "When they got the new chef at the Old Mill, she got a job there. They're more expensive and get the high rollers, so it was a no-brainer for her. I think she just about doubled her tips. And then she met that new guy. She seemed happy. If something awful happened, it's so unfair for it to have happened now."

"It would be unfair whenever it happened."

"Yeah, I guess nobody deserves tragedy. Did you see what the car looked like?"

"You think Wes let me get that close? Last I heard, they still didn't have the car out of the river. They're probably going to have to bring in a crane. It's in one of the deep spots where the banks

are really steep.”

Now that I thought about it, that spot wasn’t too far from the Old Mill, which was across the river from that road. Someone leaving the restaurant might have driven down the River Road, though they’d have been heading away from town. Going where? “The only pictures we were able to get for the paper showed all the police and fire department people on the side of the road. I’m hoping we can get a photographer there when they pull the car out.”

“I hope they aren’t leaving any bodies in there until they get a crane.”

“I wouldn’t think so. If they know who they are, they must have them out already. Moving the car will be trickier.”

If Tyler Grant was the businessman from Dallas Tiffani was dating, I wondered if he had anything to do with that El Rio Development company. The ghost hadn’t mentioned him, but if he was a developer who was buying up land, that would fit. He might have been showing his girlfriend the land he’d bought when the angry ghost of a person he’d defrauded had scared him into running off the road and into the river. Maybe Ryan Dobert had been a local connection, helping him find his targets. Or maybe Tyler Grant had been entirely innocent and the ghost had mistaken him for Ryan Dobert.

I definitely needed to keep digging. Margarita’s friend deserved justice.

AFTER DINNER, I went back to the office and did a search on Tyler Grant. He’d never been mentioned in the *Gazette*, but I found a few articles in Dallas business publications that mentioned him. The photos with those articles showed a handsome, dark-haired man in his mid-forties. He looked nothing like Ryan Dobert, so it was unlikely the ghost had mixed the two up and startled the wrong

man. Grant was a mid-level executive in a real estate development company, but it wasn't called El Rio. His company built master-planned communities in the outer Dallas suburbs, buying up farmland and building tract housing. That fit what seemed to be happening here, but Stirling Mills was an unlikely location for that company to target. We were too far from the Metroplex for an easy commute, and there wasn't enough local business to draw enough new residents to fill a big suburban development. Most of the new housing had been built on the other side of town, closer to Hillsboro and Waco.

We had a full set of the local high school's yearbooks in the newspaper morgue, and I went back there to look up Tiffani. If she was friends with Margarita, I imagined she was about the same age, so I started with the book from Margarita's freshman year. I hoped she'd gone back to her maiden name so she'd be easy to find in the index. And there she was. It turned out she was in Wes's class, a few years ahead of Margarita. That meant Wes had likely already known a lot about her, though possibly not what she'd been up to lately.

From what I knew about Wes, he might have been asking questions to spur Margarita to think. His talent was mind reading. He could "hear" verbalized thoughts. He claimed that his gift wasn't that helpful in police work, but I was sure he used it to great effect, especially in situations like this. If there was something she knew but didn't want to tell him, she'd probably think about it, unless she was actively hiding something, though I didn't get the impression that she had been holding anything back, either from him or from me.

Tiffani had been a cheerleader, but that was her only activity, and she hadn't been voted to any honors. She hadn't been nominated for homecoming, prom, or Spring Blossom queen. The prom pictures showed her with a tall, blond boy. Remembering what Margarita had said about Tiffani's ex playing football, I looked up the team picture and found him. His name was Blake

Larsen. Like Tiffani, he didn't seem to have done much else, and he hadn't been elected to anything. I was probably stereotyping, but he struck me as being a bit of a redneck, the kind of guy who'd expect his woman to shut up and make him a sandwich while he sat in his recliner, scratching himself and watching sports on TV.

I flipped back to the prom picture. Tiffani definitely didn't look happy. I knew the camera might have merely caught her at a bad moment and I was probably projecting based on what Margarita had told me, but this didn't look like a couple I would have expected to marry right out of high school. She looked like a girl who was afraid she wouldn't be able to do better. It was a real pity if she had finally managed to do better, only to end up in the river. That river had swallowed a lot of potential. One of the first cases I'd investigated in this town had involved a high school valedictorian who'd died when her car was pushed down the riverbank. That seemed to be where jerks around here tried to get rid of inconvenient people. I made a mental note to stay away from the river when I was dealing with anyone I didn't entirely trust.

I didn't find a Tyler Grant in any yearbook, though I did find Ryan Dobert. Based on his graduation year, I pegged him at around forty-four. As a teen, he'd had a fresh-faced, all-American look to him. He'd been on the football team, but didn't seem to have been a star, and he was in the drama club, much to my surprise. He'd been in the cast of an award-winning one-act play, even winning some acting awards. He was also on the debate team, where he'd gone to the state championship. He was voted most popular boy. Either he was truly good at persuasion and making people believe what he wanted them to believe, or he was supernaturally gifted.

He'd graduated before the newspaper had been digitized, so I found the bound volume containing his graduation year and took it to my desk. I flipped through the paper, skimming for articles about the football team and drama club.

"Have you found who the victims were?" Jean asked, appearing next to my desk. She was casually dressed in wide-legged, loose

slacks and a sweater. I guessed weather didn't matter in the afterlife, so she didn't have to dress for the season.

"Maybe," I said. "Wes came to the restaurant and asked Margarita about a couple of names. He wouldn't say what it was about, though."

"It's not as though anything else happened today. That's gotta be it. So, who were they?"

"A real estate developer from Dallas and his local waitress girlfriend, who used to work for Margarita."

"Not the name your ghost gave you?"

"No. I'm trying to find a connection, if there is one." I pointed to the drama club article on the page in front of me. "This Ryan guy was an actor, and it sounds like everyone really liked him. Was there some kind of charm or charisma talent? Something different from the hypnosis, not making people do things against their will but maybe charming them into buying into an idea and the person selling it." I sighed. "Or maybe not. That doesn't sound like it would be much good for a carnival show."

"But it would come in handy for a carnival barker."

"Really?"

She shrugged. "I never confirmed it, so I can't be sure if it was one of their uncanny talents or just a skill, but a couple of the barkers got jobs as salesmen when they got stuck here, and they were wildly successful. Maybe there was something spooky going on."

Unfortunately, it was hard to track back who was descended from the sideshow people, since a couple of generations had passed, and women changed their names when they married. In the last case I'd dealt with, the people in the present were descended from an affair, so there had never been anything official linking them to the sideshow.

I was just about to ask Jean another question when someone knocked on the office door. I got up to peer through the glass and saw that it was Wes. I unlocked it for him. "I saw your light on in

here and thought I'd stop by," he said. "Hope you don't mind." He was still in uniform, but his bearing was much more relaxed and friendly. I got the impression he was in off-duty mode, when he was much less prone to bossing me around. When he was like this, I couldn't help but wonder if maybe that sense that there might be something building between us wasn't just in my head.

"Not at all," I said, stepping back to let him in. "Was there something you needed?"

He glanced down at his shoes. "I just, well, I wondered what you told Margarita after I left."

"I told her what I know, which isn't much, just that someone found a car in the river. I don't know if there were bodies in it or who those people were, but it was pretty easy to do the math and figure out why you were asking her about those people."

He came around my desk and sank into my guest chair. I shuddered, since I knew the chair was already occupied. Jean left the chair, passing through him, and he shivered. "Well, that was rude," Jean said.

I knew he knew I could see and talk to her, but I still ignored her. It's weird to talk to a ghost in front of someone who doesn't see it. "Those were the victims, weren't they?" I said, taking my seat at my desk.

"The names of the victims aren't being released, pending notification of next of kin," he said, rubbing his eyes. It was at times like these that I could tell how much the job wore on him. It was easy for me to get caught up in curiosity as I wrote my stories, but he had to deal with dead bodies and crime victims. "How did Margarita take it?" he asked, his forehead creased with concern.

"She was a little rattled, of course. I talked her into taking a break."

"Good. That she took a break, I mean. Not good that she was rattled." He paused, then said, "Did she say anything else?"

"You didn't read anything from her?"

He flinched. "That's not what I was up to," he protested. "And

besides, she's almost as hard to read as you are."

"Does that mean she has a gift?"

"Well, we know who she's descended from." Her great-great-grandmother had been the carnival fortune-teller. "But since that gift is almost as awkward as mine, she's probably learned to put up blocks. So, what did she say?"

I realized I still had the bound book of newspapers open to an article featuring Ryan Dobert. Since I wasn't quite ready to discuss that with him, I casually closed the book as I thought about how to answer him.

It turned out I'd hidden the wrong thing. I still had the article about Tyler Grant up on my computer screen, and he said, "Really, Lex? You don't waste much time, do you?"

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Chapter Four

“**Y**ou’re surprised?” Jean said before I could.

But he couldn’t hear her, so I repeated it, adding, “Come on, you ask questions about people in front of me, and you don’t think I’m going to look them up?”

“What did you get?” He leaned closer to look at my screen.

“You don’t know already?”

“I have a name on a driver’s license. The DPS is tracking down his emergency contact info. I haven’t had time to look for anything else. I spent most of the day on the riverbank.”

“He works for a real estate developer in Dallas. If he’s the guy who was dating Tiffani, he’d apparently been a regular at the Old Mill while he was in town on business. I haven’t yet looked up his company to see if they were involved in any real estate deals around here.”

“Don’t tell him any more!” Jean interrupted, moving to stand between Wes and me. “Make him do his own work! He can’t shut you out of investigations and then barge in here to demand your research. It doesn’t work that way.”

I didn’t entirely disagree with her. Which was why I didn’t mention what the ghost had told me about getting ripped off in a land sale or the possible connection to Ryan Dobert.

Wes was quiet for a moment, as though waiting for me to say something else and fill the silence. I knew—and often used—that trick, so I waited him out. “Anything else?” he finally asked.

"I haven't had that much time. Are you thinking it was foul play, not just driving off the road?"

"All that is under investigation, though you'd have to be either really impaired or really distracted to drive off the road and all the way into the river around there. If you weren't run off the road."

"Run off the road?"

"We don't know anything," he hurried to add as he stood. "Well, thanks. I just wanted to see how Margarita was. I hate having to drop things like that on people without being able to tell them why." As he walked around my desk to get to the door, he slowed to get a good look at my screen. I didn't get in his way, but I didn't get out of his way, either. He was as capable of using Google as I was, and it had been easy enough to find that information.

"You will let me know when you can release names, right?" I said, standing to walk him to the door. "And when you're getting the car out of the river. If I don't get that photo, I'll have to put a bride on the front page, and then everyone will expect to get their wedding on the front page. Chaos will ensue. Riots may happen. I'll have to turn the newspaper into a bridal magazine."

"And no one wants that. I'll let you know when I have something I can release. Good night, Lex." The way he said it, it almost sounded like he really was wishing me a good night, like it mattered to him that I had a pleasant evening. Or that might only have been my imagination. There was something about him that kept me off-kilter.

I hadn't even locked the door behind him before Jean resumed her seat. Not that she needed the chair. She floated just above it. "He doesn't seem so bad," she said. "A darn sight better than his great-grandfather, who was a real piece of work."

"You knew his great-grandfather?"

"He was a cop here back in the thirties. He'd take any excuse to knock a few heads. I had to hold him back from the sideshow folks a few times. I bet he rolled over in his grave when his grandson

married someone descended from the sideshow. But then he wasn't too different from many of the men around here at that time. Be grateful you're alive now instead of then. My father had to buy a newspaper so I could work as a reporter covering anything but society news. There were female reporters, but not many, and getting to do that work was a real battle." She laughed. "And then guess what half the paper ended up being—society news! But I got to choose what to cover instead of being stuck with it."

"I am glad to be alive now, trust me." Though it might have been better if I'd been about thirty years older and able to get into journalism before newspapers started dying. Then again, thirty years ago, I wouldn't have been able to run easy Internet searches to do my research. "It looks like I was right about this Tyler Grant guy being one of the victims, or Wes wouldn't have asked what I learned about him. But what's the connection with Ryan Dobert, if there is one?"

I flipped the bound volume open again and found where I'd left off. There were more mentions of Ryan in stories about the drama club. He'd also won a Student of the Month award from the Civic League. That article mentioned his plans to study communications at one of the big state universities. The university name rang a bell, and I turned to my computer to check the article still on the screen. "Interesting. They went to the same university, and it looks like they're about the same age, so they would have been there at the same time."

"That is interesting. Maybe they're working together."

"Thousands of people went to the same school at the same time, so they didn't necessarily know each other. You could probably name about three-fourths of the people I graduated with, and I'd have no idea who they were."

"But it is a rather astonishing coincidence."

"Yes, it is. If Ryan has that carnival barker charisma talent, he could be doing the local legwork for this developer to swoop in and buy up land on the cheap. I think I'm going to have to look

into this further.” I got up and put on the electric kettle to make tea. I was going to be up late.

THE NEXT MORNING, I was a bit bleary eyed, but I’d dug through the online public records and had a list of property sales in the same general area along the River Road. I didn’t want to call the Smith family so soon after they’d had a death, but there were plenty of other people to call. Several farms that had been in the same families for generations had recently sold for what looked like below market value. I’d tracked down current contact information for the people who’d owned the property and was ready to start making calls as soon as it was decent to do so. I wasn’t sure if farmers who’d sold their land and moved to town would still be on a farm schedule and rising early or if they’d be luxuriating in sleeping in, but since I didn’t want to antagonize anyone, I decided to wait until close to ten before calling.

Before then, I got a call from Wes. “The crane’s coming this afternoon at two if you want to send a photographer,” he said without any kind of friendly greeting. So, work mode.

“Thanks,” I said, putting on my own work mode tone. Two could play at that game.

“It may take a while to set up before they’re actually doing anything dramatic.”

“Okay, I’ll let Rick know.”

“And the next of kin have been notified, so I’ll e-mail you the official statement.”

“Good. I’ll call you if I have more questions.”

“I won’t have much more to say beyond that. We have no idea what made the car go off the road into the river.”

“Were there skid marks on the road?”

“A lot of them. Some were recent. We’ll have to do some analysis to determine if any of them are from this accident. The

investigation is in process. But don't go spinning this into some huge conspiracy, Lex. There's nothing to indicate this might be a crime."

"I was right about the last one."

"True. Is there something you know? From your, um, sources?"

I was glad we weren't face-to-face because I couldn't help but wince. It had been one thing to just not tell him anything, but now he'd asked me a direct question. "Not really." And I didn't know anything. I'd guessed at some things. "You know me, always trying to turn everything into a better story. If I do learn something, I'll let you know." I would, if I verified any of my theories.

I got off the phone, checked my e-mail for the formal statement, and said to Charlene and Jean, "Well, that verifies the victims. It was Tiffani Burka and Tyler Grant."

"Oh, poor Tiffani," Charlene said. "That girl went through so much."

I called Tyler Grant's employer, ostensibly to get a statement, but really I was curious if he'd been in Stirling Mills on their behalf or if he'd been cooking up something on his own. The receptionist who answered the phone immediately put me on hold. It was a few minutes before I was transferred. "Hi, this is Lexie Lincoln with the *Stirling Mills Gazette*," I said. "Have you heard the news about Tyler Grant?"

"Yes, we were informed," was the answer.

"Excuse me, I don't think I got your name," I said.

"Richard Stinson, legal affairs."

Oh, they'd sent me to the lawyer. Interesting. "I just wanted to see if your company had a statement or comment on the death of your employee. I'm sure it's a great loss. My sympathies."

"Mister Grant was an exemplary employee and will be greatly missed."

"Will someone else be taking over the project in Stirling Mills?"

"There is no project in Stirling Mills. Mister Grant was in your area on his own time. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting to

get to. Good day.” He hung up before I had a chance to ask anything else.

“Good day to you, too,” I said to the phone before hanging up.

“Grief-stricken, are they?” Charlene said from across the office.

“I think they’re trying to avoid any kind of scandal. He was apparently here on his own time.”

“Doing a little wheeling and dealing on the side,” Jean said.

“Or maybe just visiting his girlfriend,” I said. But then Margarita said Tiffani had met him because he’d become a regular. How could he have been here so often in the middle of the week if he wasn’t doing something for his job? And she’d thought he was in town on business. The mystery deepened.

I figured by this time I could start calling people. I dialed up the first name on my list. “Hi, Melody Jackson?” I said when she answered.

“Yes,” she said, sounding wary.

“This is Lexie Lincoln with the *Gazette*. I’m working on a piece about people selling their family land, and I was wondering—” I didn’t get to finish my sentence before the call ended with a firm click. I got similar results from the next two names on the list. On the next call, I braced myself for another rejection, but I managed to finish my sentence. It actually took me a second to remember what I’d been planning to say before getting cut off, so I hesitated before continuing. “I was wondering whether you’d be willing to talk to me about the sale of your land. I’d love to talk about your family history there and what it means to you for things to be moving on, as well as what persuaded you to sell at this time and how you feel about it.”

Rebecca Dane surprised me by saying, “Sure. Do you want to come over this afternoon?”

“That would be great!” I said, probably a little too enthusiastically, but it was exciting to finally have someone respond. We set a time, and I got the address—of course, I already had it, but I figured it might freak her out a little if I didn’t need to

ask. People didn't like to think about how much information about them was publicly available.

I spent the rest of the morning prepping for the interview. I knew I'd need to handle this carefully, especially given the way all the others had reacted to my call. It sounded like this was a touchy subject. "Do you know Rebecca Dane?" I asked Charlene.

"I think I've run into her a few times. She sold her land?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. I never would have expected that. Their family goes way back on that land, long before it was part of the town. In fact, they fought against being annexed. But I guess after her husband died she didn't want to live out there alone anymore, and she wasn't up to running the farm. Her kids must not have wanted it."

"She had kids?" I asked, making a note. I wondered what they thought about all this and if they'd have anything to say.

"Yeah, a boy and a girl. I taught the girl in junior high, a long time ago. The kids surely have kids by now. I haven't kept up with them, though."

I searched the newspaper archives for more information on the family, but didn't come up with much of anything. They apparently weren't the sort of people who ended up in the newspaper often. By the time of the interview, I figured I was as ready as I'd ever be. I made sure Rick was set to get photos of the car being pulled out of the river before I went to my apartment over the newspaper office to change into more professional attire. I'd raided the collection of Jean's old wardrobe that had been left in the closet, so I had some spiffy vintage clothes that made me feel like a girl reporter from an old movie. For this interview, I went with a crisp cotton dress and a neat little straw hat. I tucked a tiny card reading "press" into the hatband for a finishing touch. Most people wouldn't notice it, but it made me happy.

Rebecca Dane lived in an assisted living complex on the other side of the railroad from downtown. It consisted of fourplex bungalows arranged around a community center. I found the right

bungalow, parked in the nearest visitor spot, and approached her door. The woman who opened the door in response to my knock was a lot older than she'd sounded. I could see why she wouldn't have wanted to stay on a remote farm by herself. She looked pretty spry, but there was a fragility about her, like a good puff of wind would disintegrate her. She wore a dress that was probably from about the same era as mine, and her white hair had been styled in a way that required weekly visits to the beauty shop for a set. "Miss Lincoln?" she said, "Do come in."

"Thank you so much for talking to me," I said, following her inside. She led me through a small foyer to a living room that was so packed with things that there wasn't much room to move. It looked like she'd tried to cram all the contents of a much larger house into this small apartment. The room was full of furniture—a sofa and two armchairs, plus coffee table, side tables, and consoles—and almost every horizontal surface was covered either with potted plants or knickknacks and framed photos. It was a little overwhelming, and I had to resist the urge to flee.

I was about to say something about what a big help she was to my story when I realized we weren't alone. A man stood there, casually leaning on the fireplace mantel. It had taken me a moment to notice him among all the clutter, since he was partially blocked from my view by a potted fern and a statuette of a shepherdess. Once I saw him, though, the rest of the room faded into the background. He wasn't a particularly large man, but his presence filled the room. With wavy blond hair and a ruggedly handsome face, he looked right out of a movie, the kind of guy who'd be a ski instructor at a resort where the heroine was iced in over Christmas, or else he'd be the reclusive mountain man who gave the heroine shelter when a storm stranded her. He was a bit old for me, but was probably around the age that he'd be paired with actresses who were child stars on eighties sitcoms.

He greeted me with a smile that revealed white, perfectly straight teeth and stepped forward to grasp my hand in a firm

shake. “Miss Lincoln,” he said. “Good to meet you. I’m Ryan
Dobert.”

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Chapter Five

I was momentarily stunned speechless, which was probably for the best, because it kept me from babbling anything stupid. I didn't recall asking the people I'd called about Ryan Dobert or even mentioning his name to anyone but Charlene. Although she'd spoken well of him, I didn't think she'd have ratted me out to anyone outside the newspaper. I'd merely asked a few people about their land sales.

Which meant he had to be involved in the sales, or he wouldn't be here. Someone I'd called must have called him, and he'd inserted himself into the situation, probably counting on me being as charmed by him as all the old people he'd swindled had been and figuring that would balance out the fact that he'd verified my suspicions just by being there. I knew my own gift gave me some protection against Wes's mind reading, but would it shield me from this guy's charisma? Maybe just being aware of it would help protect me.

I hoped it didn't take as long as it felt for me to manage to find my voice and say, "Hi. Are you related to Mrs. Dane?" I thought playing innocent was the best approach, since I only knew his name because of something a ghost had said.

"She's a friend of the family," he said, apparently also playing innocent. "She mentioned that she was meeting with you, and I didn't like the idea of her talking to a reporter without having someone on her side present."

“I’m not exactly doing a big exposé,” I said with a laugh I hoped sounded more casual than deranged. “There’s not really a side here. It’s just a feature story.”

“Why don’t we all sit down?” Rebecca said, fluttering her hands nervously.

Ryan took the seat next to her on the sofa, and I sat in one of the armchairs, which might have been a bad move, since it made me look like I was in opposition to the two of them, but then sitting beside them on the sofa would have had its own drawbacks. “What story, exactly, are you working on?” Ryan asked, his smile still pleasant, but with a suspicious gleam in his eyes.

I should have come up with a more detailed cover story when I was preparing for the interview, but I went with what I’d told Rebecca on the phone and elaborated. “I was interested in people who’ve recently sold their family land. What is that like, how do you make a decision like that, what are some of the reasons people do it? And also maybe get into the changes in the town that may be happening because of some of the new things that are being built.” I’d have to write the story now, I supposed, unless Rebecca proved so uncooperative that I couldn’t get a story out of it. It actually wasn’t a bad story idea, and I’d probably need something to go in the next issue, unless a big event happened before then.

“I’m curious, what sparked this story idea?” Ryan asked, still smiling with steel in his eyes.

For a moment, I was tempted to say a ghost told me about it, just to see how he’d react, but I didn’t want that sort of thing getting spread around the town. His movie star looks gave me the perfect idea. “This is going to sound silly,” I said with a shy giggle, “but I’m addicted to those romance movies that are on cable, and I think about half of them are about people trying to save their family land from developers—they feel like they’re going to have no choice but to sell, but then they come up with something at the last second to save everything. That made me wonder what that kind of decision is really like—although we don’t have any

Christmas tree farms or candy cane factories in this area, like in the movies. I knew there's been a lot of development around here, so I started looking up land deals to find people to interview." I shrugged. "Let's just say that the news is really slow this time of year, and I was scrambling for something to write."

I thought he relaxed ever so slightly, and his eyes softened a bit. "Interesting story idea."

"I thought so. The town seems to be changing a lot, and maybe I should capture the perspective of some longtime residents instead of just talking about the changes as though they're great for everyone." Turning to Rebecca, I said, "Mrs. Dane, how long has your family been living around Stirling Mills?"

She glanced at Ryan as though asking for permission to speak. He gave her a nearly imperceptible nod, and she said to me, "My ancestor settled here in the 1850s, before the Civil War, just after Texas joined the United States. Our family has lived on that piece of land ever since, though bits of it have been sold off or given away over the years. We used to have that whole stretch along the River Road, but sons were given pieces of it to start their own homes."

"So, all the land along the river was in your family?"

"A hundred years ago, it was. But some of the family members who inherited pieces sold along the way. I suppose I'm distantly related to a few of the other owners. After a hundred and fifty years or so from your common ancestor, you're barely connected anymore. My family's land was held the longest by the same direct line." Her posture straightened and she held her head higher with pride.

"Selling must have been a huge move, then," I said. "What prompted you to make that decision?"

She glanced at Ryan again, and I thought she looked a little confused, as though she didn't know for certain. "The timing was good," he said. "Other land on that stretch had already been sold for development, which sent the value up."

She frowned. "I thought the state was going to take it to widen the road."

He reached over and squeezed her hand reassuringly. "No, that's what that other person told you before you called me."

Okay, that was fishy. I wished we could have had this conversation in her old house, which was probably thick with ghosts who could have given me the real scoop. I doubted any of them were happy about the land being sold. The newly built bungalow didn't seem to have the slightest wisp of specter about it. I glanced around the room, noting all the family photos. Hoping I wasn't venturing into sensitive territory that would make her clam up, I asked, "What do your children think about it? Were none of them interested in keeping the family farm going?"

She looked to him yet again, like she didn't know the answer to the question. "Young people today aren't as interested in that sort of thing," he said. "Farming and ranching don't make that much money, and it's a lot of work. Riverfront property is more valuable for housing. And the kids will get more out of it when it comes to their inheritance this way."

Yeah, definitely fishy. I made a mental note to look up Rebecca's kids and talk to them. I wondered if Ryan got to them, too. "They didn't put up any fuss about it?"

"I think they understood that I couldn't live out there alone anymore," Rebecca said. "I'm safer and happier here. They take care of me. There's housekeeping and laundry service. I don't even have to cook if I don't want to. They have dinners in the community center."

"That must make your life a lot easier," I said. "But I'm sure you had mixed feelings about leaving the home you grew up in. Did it go all the way back to your ancestor, or was it built more recently?"

"It's not the sort of house that has a historical marker on it," Ryan said. "The house was rebuilt a few times along the way. It won't stand in the way of development." I barely resisted the urge

to flinch at his callous tone.

If it bothered Rebecca, she didn't show it. "My family had land, not money," she said. "The house was nothing special. It did have memories, though . . ." Her eyes went misty.

"So you didn't want to live alone on the farm anymore and decided to sell," I said. "Did you put the land on the market, or did someone approach you about selling, and that was when you thought about it?"

"Well, Ryan—" she began, but he cut her off.

"She'd been thinking about it and asked around, so I thought I'd help to make sure she didn't get taken advantage of."

"You weren't the buyer?" I asked.

"Oh, no. I just helped her through the process."

My skepticism must have been evident on my face because he ramped up the charm, giving me the full impact of his baby blue eyes, white teeth, and dimples. I could feel a wave of something hit me, confirming my belief that his charm was supernatural. For a moment, it affected me, making me want to listen to him, to do anything that would keep him around me. I wanted to bask in his glory, soak up his attention. I was special because he'd singled me out.

Then I realized what was happening, and I felt the effect lessen. If he'd hit people with that, I could see where they'd have been eager to sign anything he put in front of them. "Are you affiliated in any way with the buyer?" I asked.

He blinked, as though he was somewhat surprised by the question. He must not have been accustomed to being doubted. "I'm not in the real estate business at all," he said.

"You're just Mrs. Dane's old family friend."

"Right."

"And how long has your family been associated with the town?"

"Well, different branches of the family came at different times."

"Did you grow up with Mrs. Dane's children?"

“We were in school together, so I’ve known the family for most of my life.”

I suspected that just about everyone in town could have said the same thing, but refrained from pointing that out. I didn’t want to give him the impression that I was questioning him. Turning back to Rebecca, I said, “How did it feel to sign that paperwork and know that an era had ended? It must have been bittersweet.”

“It was,” she said with a sigh. “But it was good not to have the responsibility anymore. And to have some money. I can be at ease now.”

“What do you think about what’s going to happen to that land, the way it will be changed?”

“I try not to think about it, to be honest. I haven’t been by there. I don’t think anything’s been built, though, so it hasn’t started changing yet. I understand they have to wrap up the sales of the other land near there, and then there are plans and permits, and things like that.”

If I really had been doing a story about selling the family land, I wasn’t getting much material here. It was hard to imagine that it had been such a clinical thing to walk away after generations. I got the strangest impression that she didn’t actually remember signing anything. “Did you have some kind of family meeting about it before making the decision?” I asked, adding with a laugh, “That’s how it always seems to go in those movies. Did your children make any attempt to change your mind, or were they in favor of it?”

Ryan jumped in before she even turned to him. “It wasn’t their property. They didn’t have a say in the matter, so there was no reason to consult them.”

“Who was running the farm?” I asked. “Or were you not operating it as a farm?”

“My son ran cattle on the land,” Rebecca said. “He managed the business side of things for me.”

“I guess the sale meant he had to shut down that operation,” I said.

“He was offered the opportunity to lease the land from the new owners until they actually start development,” Ryan said, “but he chose to sell the cattle instead.”

For a “family friend,” I thought he knew an awful lot about the details of the deal. “It sounds like she was lucky to have you on her side,” I said with my best “bless your heart” smile. “You seem to have been involved every step of the way. It was as good as having a lawyer. Or are you a lawyer?”

He gave up attempting to charm me and hit me with a glare powerful enough that it might have knocked me over if I’d been standing. It was like cold water running down my back, and it took everything I had not to shiver. If I hadn’t been in such a new building, I would have been sure I was sitting on a ghost. “I don’t know what you’re insinuating here, Miss Lincoln,” he said, his voice raspy.

I barely managed to maintain the casual tone of someone who had no idea what he was talking about. “I’m not insinuating anything. I’m just curious. Occupational hazard, I’m afraid. I’m trying to make all the pieces fit.”

“I suppose you’d have preferred to be able to take advantage of an elderly woman without me being here to run interference.”

I fought to maintain my cool, but I figured that even if I knew nothing about a possible scheme, I’d have taken offense, so I let myself sound frosty. “I’m not sure what advantage there is to take. I was merely interviewing her for a human interest story. It’s not as though I’m entangling myself in a major life decision involving large amounts of money.”

“You’re trying to play upon her emotions, get her to think she made a bad decision, painting the developers as villains. I know exactly what you’re up to.”

I thought someone was doing a wee bit of projecting there, since I didn’t recall even hinting at any of that. He must have watched the same movies I did, where the developers were generally the villains. Only, in this case, no one came up with a

way to save the family farm. There hadn't been a town bake sale to raise money, and they hadn't come up with a new way to make money from the property. "I don't recall saying any such thing," I said stiffly. "You seem to be reading a lot into what I'm saying." Very pointedly turning away from him to address Rebecca, I said, "If you aren't comfortable continuing and don't want to participate in the article, I'll understand."

"I, uh, well, I," she began, then glanced at Ryan. He hit her with all the charm he had. I could feel the edge of the wave from where I sat. She pulled herself together and said, "I think maybe this was a bad idea."

I flipped my notebook closed. "Then never mind." If I'd actually wanted to write the article, I'd have been disappointed, but I thought I had what I really wanted. I was now fairly certain that Ryan Dobert was involved in the deals along the River Road. "Thank you for your time. I'm sorry for wasting it."

When I stood to go, Ryan stood, as well. "I'll see you out."

He walked me to the door, and once we were outside on the front step, he said softly, "I don't know what game you're playing here, Miss Lincoln, but I'll have you know that this town won't stand for this kind of tabloid journalism, and I'll make sure you don't get any further with this nonsense."

Chapter Six

There were a lot of things I could have said to Dobert, but every one of them would have let him know I was on to him, and I wanted to maintain at least the pretense of innocence so that I wouldn't reinforce his perception of me as a threat. "I'm not sure what you mean," I said, fighting to keep my voice and my hands from trembling. I barely managed to keep my voice steady, and I had to grip my purse with one hand and my skirt with the other so my hands wouldn't visibly shake. In my whole career, I'd never been accused of any kind of ethical violation.

"Stay away from Mrs. Dane," he said. "And everyone else who's been selling land. Their decision was hard enough without you coming along to make them second-guess it."

"That wasn't my intent," I said. "I was merely looking at it from the perspective of changes that are happening in the town, which is of local interest. But it sounds like that's not something people want to discuss."

My head held high, I marched to my car on watery legs and got out of there as quickly as I could. A few minutes later, I realized I'd been in such a hurry to leave that I'd driven in the opposite direction from my office. But I was on the road that led to where all the fast-food places were, so I went to a drive-through and got a chocolate shake to calm my nerves. That had been the most unsettling encounter I'd had in my entire newspaper career, and I'd interviewed members of the mafia and white supremacist gangs. At

least their nastiness was purely human and not a superpower targeting me.

By the time I looped around and made it back to town, the chocolate had settled me somewhat so I was outraged rather than shaken. I knew I'd have to play this carefully, given the reputation Ryan seemed to have in town. It wouldn't be a good idea to openly go up against someone who was universally liked and had a power that made people like him. I suspected that every door in town would be firmly shut against me on this subject, and that made me even more convinced that something was going on. Otherwise, why would he bother to shut me out? If he was only looking after an old friend, this was overkill.

No, he was up to something crooked. I was certain now that the land deals were shady and he was involved, and there might be even more going on. Maybe it hadn't been the ghost running Tyler Grant off the road. Maybe Ryan had been involved in the deals, the local front man for the scheme, and he'd eliminated his partner so he could reap all the profits.

I still had some anger to work out before I wanted to go back to the office, so I decided to head out to the River Road and see what was going on with the crane. I didn't need to supervise the photographer, but there was something to be said for being on the scene of a major news event, and right now in this town, this was the biggest news of the week—at least, until I broke the story of a real estate scheme.

The police had set up barricades a good distance down the road, but I could see why because the machinery they were using for getting the car out of the river was pretty big, and I wouldn't want to be under it if it toppled or if it dropped its load. I got out of the car, still sipping my milkshake, but stayed behind the barricades. Wes shot me a glance, and I gave him a friendly wave, but he didn't come over, either to chat or to chide me for being present for something he didn't consider news.

There wasn't a lot going on, just people milling around. I

assumed they were doing whatever setup was required. While I waited for the dramatic moment when the car came out of the river, I found my attention wandering to the land across the road from the river. There was no sign of building activity anywhere, no dirt work, no surveyors' flags, no signs advertising the fabulous new development that would be coming soon. I couldn't tell whether or not the house I could see from where I stood was currently occupied. It was an old frame house with a big front porch, the kind of place where kids grew up and then brought their kids back for Thanksgiving dinners with the grandparents. Had a family been cheated out of those Thanksgivings?

Now that I was calmer and not reacting in anger, I decided that Ryan Dobert had made a big mistake by showing up for that interview and overplaying his hand because he'd confirmed that he was up to something he didn't want me looking into, and that made me even more determined to dig into it. If no one involved would talk to me, though, pursuing the story would be something of a challenge.

Then again, it was possible that his charm wouldn't work on the dead. After all, it had been a ghost that had tipped me off in the first place. Maybe I needed to find out what the ancestors really thought of the land sales.

THE RAISING of the car was pretty impressive, and from what I could tell, there were no bodies in the mud-coated red sports car the crane lifted out of the river, so I could reassure Margarita that her friend hadn't been sitting out there all this time. The pictures would look great on the front page, and with no bodies in the car, I'd be able to use them. I headed back to the office, making a quick detour to my apartment to change into something more comfortable before going downstairs. "You've got some messages," Charlene said as I approached my desk. "I don't know what you've

been up to today, but you seem to have hit a nerve.”

“I haven’t been up to anything. I went to one interview that went nowhere, then went to watch the car being lifted out of the river.” I picked up the pile of message slips and sifted through them. “These are subscription cancellations.”

“Yes, they are.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jean said, passing through the back wall. “It happens all the time. People get mad, cancel, then resubscribe when there’s something they want to read.”

I got to the last slip, which said I needed to call Evelyn Novak, the president of the board that ran the newspaper. She was also Wes’s grandmother and one of my biggest allies in the town. Sometimes she even sided with me against Wes. My stomach gave a little twist. Had she turned against me? Ryan might have been more powerful than I gave him credit for. I sat down at my desk and steeled myself before picking up the phone to call her. “Hi, it’s Lexie. I had a message you’d called,” I said when she answered.

“What have you been up to?” she asked. “You’ve made some people very angry.” That was so much like what Charlene had just said that it was a little eerie. Even Wes wasn’t sure just how much of the mind reading gift his grandmother had, but she definitely kept me wondering.

“Nothing!” I insisted. “I went to interview someone, and she had this guy with her who must have a guilty conscience because he started accusing me of all kinds of horrible things, and then he threatened to ruin me.”

“What guy?” she asked.

“Ryan Dobert. Do you know him?”

“He’s been at a few Civic League events. But what you’ve said doesn’t sound at all like him. Everyone loves him.”

“Because they have no choice. I think he’s got some kind of charisma or charm power. Jean says maybe he’s descended from one of the barkers.”

“Oh, I never considered that. It would certainly explain a lot.” I

relaxed quite a bit at that. At least she was willing to consider the possibility. I might stand a chance of keeping my job. "What story were you working on?"

"Well, a ghost was very angry about him, and that led me to look up what happened along the River Road. It turns out there were some real estate deals, so I went to interview someone who sold her farm, and he was there, which I find fishy."

"I find it hard to believe Ryan would do anything dishonest. Perhaps you could be a bit more diplomatic."

Okay, maybe I wasn't in the clear with her. "I didn't accuse him of anything. He's the one who went ballistic at the idea of me even talking to someone." I knew I sounded defensive, and I hated it, but I felt like I really needed to defend myself. "It sounded like a lot of projection to me."

"Just be careful. He has the ear of a lot of people in town, and he could make it impossible for you to do your job."

It sounded like I still had a job, which was good. "I will stay away from him, if at all possible," I promised. "And please check with me before you believe anything you hear."

"I will," she promised.

"Oh, you crossed Ryan," Charlene said when I hung up. "People love him. You really think he's got a gift?"

"I'm pretty sure I felt it working on me, but you can resist it if you know what's going on."

"Then that makes it even more important for you to be careful," she said. "He's had a lifetime to get under people's skin."

"This one guy can dictate what I do with the newspaper?"

"He might be able to dictate who talks to you and who subscribes."

Which meant that either I danced to his tune the whole time I was here for fear of getting run out of town, or I exposed him for what he was. I knew what my choice was. That was why I geared up that evening to go interview the ghosts of the River Road. I didn't relish tromping through the roadside weeds after dark, since

there was no telling what was in those weeds. I put on my hiking boots and a sturdy pair of jeans, and I brought a flashlight with a filter so the light wouldn't kill my night vision. When I pulled off the road and got out of the car, I sprayed myself liberally with bug spray that I hoped would fend off the ticks, chiggers, mosquitoes, and whatever else was out there.

Steeling myself, I headed toward where I'd seen the ghost earlier. If it was mad enough to appear in broad daylight, then surely it would come out at night. "Hello?" I called softly. "I want to talk to you about Ryan Dobert."

I held my breath when I saw a soft glow ahead of me. "Ryan Dobert cheated me!" the ghost said.

"Yes, he is a cheat," I said. "What did he do?"

"He told me lies and took my land." Which was what she'd said the last time.

"Did he also cheat the others near here, your neighbors?"

"He cheated me!"

Okay, so maybe this ghost wouldn't be any additional help. "Thanks for the tip. I'll get him for you," I said before moving down the road to the next property. "Hello!" I called out softly there. "Did anyone take your land?"

"My children have left me," a woman dressed like a 1930s housewife said mournfully. "They were here, and now they're gone."

"When did they go?" I asked, then realized what a stupid question that was. Ghosts have no sense of time. Jean was always having to ask me what month or year it was, and she worked on a newspaper, which kept her in touch with the land of the living. A ghost who was less grounded wouldn't stand a chance. "What took them away from you?"

"They were in my house where I could see them, but no one's there now." This was the house I'd been able to see while I was waiting for the car to be lifted.

"Did they sell your land?"

A gust of wind hit me. “Sell my land? They wouldn’t dare! It belongs to our family.”

“I’m afraid they did.”

“No! No one else will live here, not while I’m around.”

I consoled myself with the fact that even if my investigation went nowhere, any development on this property was likely to fail when it turned out to be haunted by angry ghosts. While most people couldn’t see them or communicate with them, I was sure that there would be some really unpleasant energy, and a ghost that angry could stir things up and blow things around.

I went back to my car because the next piece of land was farther than I wanted to walk down this road in the dark. It had been the most recent to sell, and I didn’t know if that meant any ghosts would still be confused or if they’d be really riled by the changes. The trees were denser on this plot, blocking the view from the road. I made sure to keep an eye out for the fence. Walking face-first into barbed wire would be a really bad idea. “Hello? Is anyone here? Do you want to talk about your land being sold?”

Instead of an angry ghost, what I got was an angry dog. The bark I heard was deep, indicating a large dog, and it sounded like it was moving toward me. It was on the other side of the fence, but there was a driveway nearby, so I was under no illusion that the dog couldn’t get to me. I didn’t think I could get back to my car before the dog reached me. “Nice doggy,” I said weakly, wishing I’d thought to bring some dog treats with me. I wasn’t sure why I’d have thought of that, since I didn’t have a dog, and I hadn’t expected anyone to still be living on this land.

The barking and growling was getting awfully close, and I saw the dog heading toward me down the side of the road. I wanted to run, but I’d heard that was a bad idea, and I doubted I could outrun it. I looked around for a big stick or a branch I could use to defend myself, but nothing was close at hand. Fear gripped me, so that even if I’d tried to run, I didn’t think my legs would have

moved me. "Sit!" I called out in desperation, hoping the order might override its instincts. No such luck. I didn't know if that was because my voice shook too much to sound commanding or because the dog didn't take orders from strangers.

Just when I was sure I was about to be mauled, a gust of wind blew up around me and then toward the dog, who whimpered and ran in the opposite direction. "Thanks," I told the ghost materializing in front of me. It was an older man wearing overalls, so he could have come from any time in the past century. "This your land?"

"Been in my family forever," he said.

"Is it still? Because the records I saw say it's been sold. I guess they haven't moved out yet, if their dog is still here."

"Sold?" he roared. "Not this land." He glowed brighter and distorted in a way that made me want to run away, whimpering, like the dog had.

But I stood my ground and kept my cool, since I didn't think the ghost was mad at me. "So, you don't know anything about this deal? Who bought the land? Why?"

"Sold! Never!" and he was off, maybe to go haunt his descendants.

I sighed. It seemed the ancestors were unhappy, but they didn't know much about what had happened, other than that one ghost, who couldn't give me more than the name. I was just about to trudge back to my car when I saw headlights approaching. I moved closer to the nearest tree, hoping whoever was driving by wouldn't spot me. But they would see my car, and around here people were likely to assume that a car parked on the side of the road at night was having trouble, and they'd stop to help. I started thinking of an explanation. Something flew out my window and I'd stopped to find it. That was it. And then I'd find it and thank them for stopping, even though I didn't need the help.

Sure enough, the headlights slowed when they reached my car. I took off my hat and dropped it on the ground ahead of me as the

car approached. That was when I realized it was an SUV, and it had a rack of lights on top. Oh, great, the police. Just my luck. Had the dog's owner called the cops when the dog started barking? There wouldn't have been time for an officer to make it here from town, but what if the police had been patrolling in this general area?

The SUV stopped, and I heard a door open and shut. Soon, a flashlight beam waved around. "Hello? Does someone out there need help? I saw your car."

Even worse, it was Wes. I would never hear the end of this.

His flashlight beam caught me. "Lex? Is that you? What are you doing out here at this time of night?"

"It's not that late," I said, bending to pick up my hat. With Wes, I wouldn't need the ruse. "It's just past sunset."

"This time of year, that's pretty late."

"Did someone report a trespasser?"

"No. I was driving by on patrol and saw a car on the side of the road. Out here, that generally means either someone's in trouble or someone's up to something, so I stopped."

"That's good to know," I said cheerfully. "If I ever get stranded around here with car trouble, someone will be along soon to help me out."

"Well, which is it?"

"Which what?"

"In trouble, or up to something? I'm guessing it's the latter, knowing you."

"I'm not doing anything wrong. Well, other than maybe trespassing."

"You're on the right-of-way, so you're not technically trespassing."

"Then I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm good. Everything's fine." I was pretty sure he wasn't going to buy that. I wouldn't, if I were in his shoes. Maybe it was time to tell him what I knew. He had asked me to let him know if a ghost gave me a tip, and I

thought I had enough information to work with. It would be nice to have someone in authority on my side while Ryan was slandering me around town. I should tell him.

On the other hand, what if he didn't believe me? I didn't think I could take it if he turned against me, and if he sided with Ryan, I'd have tipped my hand.

He moved closer. "Lex? You're looking into something, aren't you? Investigating that wreck, I'd guess. And being out here after sunset suggests you're talking to ghosts. So, spill, what is it?"

It looked like he was forcing my hand.

Chapter Seven

“Busted!” I said sheepishly. “I’m out here interviewing sources.”

“And?” Wes prompted.

“Well, I don’t have anything concrete, but I do have a theory.”

“I’d like to hear that theory, but this probably isn’t the best place to have a conversation. Do you have any idea what kind of things are around the roadsides out here?”

“I’m wearing boots,” I said.

“Good to know. But that won’t protect you from dogs, coyotes, wild hogs, or anything like that.”

“The ghosts take care of those,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant even though I was freaking out. The dog had been scary enough, and I’d been worried about snakes, but the thought that I might have run into a wild hog was terrifying.

“Really?” he asked, and I wished I had a better view of his face because he sounded like he might be impressed.

“Animals don’t seem to like ghosts.”

“If you say so, but I don’t think I’d count on that if I were you.” He checked his watch. “I get off duty in about an hour. Maybe I could swing by your place after that?”

“Sure!” I said, checking my own watch to see what time that would be.

He came close enough to reach out a hand to help me jump the ditch, then he walked me back to my car. “What’s that smell?” he

asked as we walked.

“Bug spray. I really did come prepared.”

“Do you have to talk to ghosts at night?”

“It’s easier to get them to come out right after sunset. If they have something to say, they’ll talk at any time, but then you have the problem of more traffic during daytime, and people are more likely to notice you standing around and talking to thin air. Really, there’s no truly convenient time and place for a conversation with a ghost, aside from the one that haunts the building where I live and work. And then with that one, sometimes I wish it wasn’t so easy to talk to her.” I’d started babbling, which was a sure sign that I was a bit rattled. Wes might have said he wanted to hear my theory, but I wasn’t sure how he’d react to it.

He made sure I got in my car and watched as I drove away. This was one time when he didn’t have to worry about me circling back after he was gone. I had what I was likely to get, which wasn’t much, and now I had to prepare for the conversation ahead of me. I headed straight home and took a quick shower to wash off all the bug spray. I hesitated over what to wear after my shower. It would be obvious that I’d changed clothes, so he’d know that anything I put on was specific to the occasion. There would be no way to pretend I just happened to be wearing a cute sundress and it had nothing to do with him coming over.

I settled for jeans and a plain white T-shirt, the kind of comfortable clothes I might wear around the house whether or not I was expecting company. I towel dried my hair, scrunched some gel into it, and put it in a ponytail. While I primped, I reminded myself that this wasn’t a date. I wasn’t sure I even wanted it to be. I didn’t really know what it was. I was very much attracted to Wes, I had to admit, if only to myself. I certainly found him intriguing. He was a puzzle I wanted to solve. Unfortunately, or maybe not, I didn’t get the impression the attraction was mutual. He found me annoying and frustrating. I got in his way and complicated his work. At best, I was somewhat relaxing to be around for him

because he wasn't bombarded with my thoughts. The whole situation reminded me of high school, when I'd had numerous unrequited crushes on guys who barely knew I existed.

Once I was dressed and I'd tidied the Art Deco time capsule that was my living room—decorated by Jean nearly a century ago—I pondered what I should do about refreshments. Would baking cookies be overkill? Not real baking, measuring and mixing things, but I did have a roll of slice-and-bake dough in the fridge. No, I decided. That would look like I was trying too hard. I was pretty sure I had a package of cookies in the cabinet, and I could dig around to find them after he arrived so that I'd appear casual and spontaneous. I looked in the cabinet to be certain they were still there and double checked the expiration date to be sure they weren't stale.

At around the time I expected him, I put a kettle on for tea. It hadn't yet boiled when I heard a knock at the door. I took a few slow, deep breaths before I went to the door, checked out the window to make sure it was Wes, then opened the door.

He was in civilian clothes—jeans and a white shirt—and his auburn hair was slightly damp, like he'd just stepped out of the shower. It curled on his forehead and over his ears in a way that made me want to play with it. I squeezed my hands into fists to fight off the urge. “Oh, hi,” I said, as though I was surprised that he'd stopped by, which was probably the wrong tone to take, given that his visit was planned. But it was too late to correct that now. “Come on in. I just put a kettle on.” When he moved past me into the apartment, I thought I detected a whiff of a musky, spicy scent—aftershave? Cologne? Or maybe just the remnants of body wash. Maybe this *was* a date. Or maybe he'd merely washed away the remains of a long, difficult day.

“You know, some tea sounds good,” he said. “You're turning me into a real Brit.”

“You have a long way to go, trust me.” I'd lived in England for a while when I was a kid, while my dad was stationed there with

the air force, and I'd developed a taste for tea. I'd become the ambassador for hot tea in this town.

"But do you have something that won't keep me up all night? I actually get to sleep tonight—well, depending on what you tell me."

"Sure! Do you want something floral, like chamomile or lavender? Or maybe fruity? Or spicy? Or minty?"

"I have no clue. I'd never had anything other than regular iced tea before you came to town."

"Let's go with orange and spice," I said. I put bags of herbal tea in two mugs and poured the hot water over them. "Want some cookies? I think I have some around here somewhere."

"That sounds good."

I opened a couple of cabinet doors before I reached the package of cookies and took them out. I was rather pleased with how casual I thought I came across. He'd only know how flustered I was if my mental blocks were failing and he could read my thoughts.

We took our tea and the cookies to the living room, and he sat in the armchair while I took the sofa. "You said you had a theory," he said, cutting straight to the chase. So, it wasn't a date, after all. That actually made me relax a little.

"Yeah. A ghost near the accident site said that Ryan Dobert had it coming because he'd cheated her out of her land by telling her lies to get her to sell it. For a while, I thought that meant he was the victim, and the ghost must have done something to startle him as he drove by, so he went off the road."

"That's not what happened."

"I know that now. The victims were entirely different people."

"And it looks like the car was run off the road. There are signs of a collision, like someone clipped the bumper, which might have caused the swerve. It wasn't just a ghost spooking him. There's also no link at all to Ryan Dobert."

"Maybe," I said. "That's where my theory comes in. I'm sure you know that most of the property on that stretch of the River

Road has recently been sold, and most of that land had been in those families for generations. Based on what the ghost told me, Ryan Dobert told them some kind of industry was going to go in around them, making the land less pleasant to live on and probably driving down values, but then the buyer turned around and told it for twice as much.”

“But Ryan Dobert doesn’t work in real estate. And what does this have to do with the accident?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe nothing. The ghost might have just been ranting instead of talking about the accident, but there’s definitely something fishy going on. I called Tyler Grant’s company, and he wasn’t here on business—not for them, at least—but he was here supposedly on business often enough to become a regular at the Old Mill and meet Tiffani. It was a development company that bought all that land, and I haven’t yet been able to figure out who’s behind it. It’s buried in layers of shell companies. So, I started calling the people who sold the land. Most of them wouldn’t talk to me, but when one agreed and I showed up for the interview, guess who was there.”

“Since you seem to be hung up on him, I’ll go with Ryan Dobert.”

“Bingo! At that point, the only people I’d mentioned him to were Jean and Charlene. He seemed very concerned that I was asking Rebecca Dane about the sale of her family’s land. He claimed he was an old family friend who was just looking out for her, and then he started accusing me of exploiting an old lady.”

“Yeah, that is a little weird. But how is this connected to the accident?”

“I’m thinking Ryan Dobert was the local contact for Tyler Grant, who was working on his own project—unless his company was involved and they were lying about it. They did send me to the legal department to get a comment about him, like they were worried about something and needed to make sure to phrase everything very carefully. If it wasn’t a ghost scaring Tyler into

running off the road, then maybe Ryan was getting rid of his partner so he could pocket all the cash.”

“I’ll look into it, but it seems a bit of a stretch, very unlikely.”

“Even if Ryan didn’t cause the accident, he’s acting pretty guilty about the real estate scheme.”

“Which might not be entirely illegal, if the sellers didn’t bother doing their own research.”

“Lying to old people isn’t illegal? Isn’t that elder abuse?”

“You’d have to prove he lied. But it doesn’t sound like anyone is unhappy with the deals they made.”

“Their ancestors are really upset, let me tell you. And that one ghost claims that she and her husband died because they were so unhappy.”

“Unfortunately, ghosts can’t press charges. I can’t investigate unless someone makes a complaint—someone who’s still alive.”

“He’s done some kind of whammy thing to them. I think he’s got a talent that gives him a lot of charisma, so they all like him.”

“Also not something I can do anything about legally. If he drugged them, I’d have a case. Putting a supernatural whammy on them isn’t against the law.”

“Because the law doesn’t acknowledge that it’s possible.”

“And thus the problem.”

“You could at least check to see if the paint on that fender damage matches any vehicles Ryan Dobert owns.”

“Nope. I couldn’t get a warrant. There’s absolutely nothing linking him to the accident. And don’t you go messing around with that, either. Nothing you found would hold up in court.”

I hated that he was right, and if Ryan was already attacking my credibility, trying to get paint samples from his car wouldn’t help matters. He’d probably accuse me of harassing him and get a restraining order, which really wouldn’t help my standing in the town. “Well, do you have any better theories?” I challenged.

“It’s an ongoing investigation.”

“If you want to convince me I’m barking up the wrong tree,

you're going to have to do better than that."

"Well, speaking unofficially, and I'm just throwing ideas out there rather than saying what I'm actually investigating, it may not have been targeted at all. Someone texting while driving or drunk or otherwise impaired realizes a split second too late that they're about to hit a car, but can't correct in time to avoid clipping the bumper, which sends the other car off the road, and then the driver who hit them just runs off rather than stopping and reporting it."

"It wouldn't be the first time that's happened around here," I acknowledged. When I first came to town, I'd dealt with two situations in which someone hadn't intended to kill but had left people to die rather than reporting it because they didn't want to deal with the fallout.

"If it did have something to do with real estate dealings—and I'm not saying it did, but the guy did work in real estate—who would be the competition for a housing development on the River Road? Maybe someone who's trying to redevelop downtown. If the development ends up being on the edge of town, it'll take away from the downtown area."

"You're trying to find an excuse to suspect Jordan, aren't you? You really do hold a grudge." Jordan and Wes had been best friends in high school but had a falling out along the way. No one I'd talked to knew what the spat was about. Even Jordan didn't seem to be entirely sure, and Wes wasn't talking.

"He's also building a house near there, and he might not want to have a big master-planned community nearby."

"His house is in the middle of his land. They could build houses on his property line, and they still wouldn't be in shouting distance of his house. If Jordan wanted to fight the development, he'd go after them with lawyers, not run the guy off the road."

"You don't know him like I do," he said, his tone dark. "And it might not even have been about Tyler Grant. It might have been someone going after Tiffani."

“Why?”

“It’s all still under investigation.”

“So, you don’t really think my tip amounts to anything?”

“I’ll keep it in mind as I pursue all the angles.” He finished his tea and put the cup down before standing. “Well, I need to be going. Thanks for telling me what you know.”

“Not that you believed me,” I said, forcing myself not to pout.

“It’s not that I don’t believe you. I’m sure that ghost told you all that. I’m just not sure it’s relevant. But I’m keeping an open mind.” It didn’t sound like it to me, but I kept that to myself as I walked him to the door. He paused in the doorway before leaving and added, “Let me do the investigating. You can write the story after I solve the case. I don’t want you getting caught up in all this.”

“You say that every time.”

“And every time I mean it. In this case, especially.”

“You think I’m in danger?”

“I think you’re in danger of ruining your position in the community by antagonizing a popular lifelong resident. Almost everyone in town knows him. Not many yet know you.”

“I should just let him get away with scamming little old ladies?”

“You have no proof that’s what he’s doing. You don’t even have enough proof to warrant an investigation. If you want to investigate crimes, you can try to get a spot in a police academy and work your way up to detective, then follow proper procedure and investigate according to the law. If not, then you can report on what the police department does.”

Only after he was out of earshot did I mutter, “Reporters investigate, too. That’s why they call it investigative reporting.”

Okay, so maybe the real estate scheme might not be technically against the law, depending on how they carried it out. And the victims might not be upset about it. But that could be because they didn’t know they’d been cheated. They didn’t yet know about the lies they were told or how much more money they would have

made if they'd worked with someone honest. That made it exactly the sort of thing that investigative reporting was all about.

As I put away the cookies and washed the mugs, I couldn't help but feel disappointed. I hadn't expected it to be a date, but I also hadn't expected to be dismissed so readily. By now, he should have known that I was usually right when something sketchy was afoot. I felt like he'd sided with Ryan against me. It was yet another reminder that we had a working relationship. We weren't really friends, or anything else. We barely knew each other, and we seldom talked when our respective jobs weren't intersecting—or colliding.

Which meant I didn't owe him anything. I'd already stirred things up enough with Ryan Dobert that the only way out was through. If I backed down, he'd always hold his position in town over me. Would he think he could dictate what went in the newspaper? I had to prove that what he was doing was wrong, and it looked like I was on my own, without any kind of police back-up.

Chapter Eight

By the next morning, I had the beginnings of a plan in place.

The people who'd actually sold the land weren't unhappy, but they were being conned, so they probably didn't know enough to realize how they'd been harmed. But what did their kids think? Were they happy to be more likely to get a cash inheritance than to have to deal with property, even if it was possibly less cash than they should have had? Did they want to carry on the family tradition on the ancestral land, or had they already left town? And had Ryan already hit them with the whammy, or might they be willing to talk to me?

It took some digging to find the daughters and sons of the former property owners. I first looked up the owners in the newspaper archives to see if I could find any articles about their children that mentioned their parents. Unfortunately, it looked like the next generation was old enough that the paper hadn't yet been digitized when they were winning student awards or getting married. I only found a few articles about the former owners winning prizes at the fair or doing something at church, and none of those gave their children's names. Searching just the last names gave me too many results, since most of them were common names, and they seemed to have large extended families. I took notes, hoping to be able to figure out the family trees. Maybe some of the siblings or cousins might have thoughts about the family farms being sold.

Midway through the morning, I looked up at Charlene. "Do you know if Charles Norton is related to Carol and Frank Norton?"

"Only distantly," she said. "Charles wouldn't have had any connection to that land. You're not still digging on that, are you?"

"There's something here, I know it, and I can't let him get away with it."

"Are you sure you're not just mad because he started talking against you?"

"Would he have had reason to talk against me if he wasn't up to something? That's not the way an innocent person acts."

"He can be full of himself and resent being questioned without being a crook."

"I didn't question him! Not until he started acting shady. If he hadn't shown up at the interview and if Rebecca Dane had told me she was happy with the land sale, I might have dropped the matter entirely."

"Check the church directories," Jean said, drifting in from her scanner spot in the press room. "We used to keep a collection of them. I know Lily kept them updated. I don't know about Paul, but the ones from Lily's tenure will be what you need."

"Church directories?" I asked.

"They're like yearbooks for churches," Charlene said. "A photography studio comes in and takes family portraits, which they use to create directory books, and then they sell overpriced packages of prints to the families. You'll probably want to go back about thirty years, and you'll see the kids in the pictures with their parents. That should give you some names to start with, though the girls will be a little more challenging to track down if they got married."

"Wow, you learn something new every day," I said. "How do I go about getting current copies for the newspaper office?"

"You start by not pissing off the whole town," she said dryly.

The directories really were a great resource, full of photos of just about everyone in town, grouped by family. I had to flip

through several different churches before I found one of my target families. Their children were teens in the book, but they'd be middle-aged now, probably with kids of their own, maybe even grandkids. I looked up the kids' names, tracked down their phone numbers, then set about calling them. The first person I called hung up as soon as I identified myself. The next one let me get as far as, "I'm working on a story about the sale of old family properties, and I understand your parents recently sold your family farm," before she hung up on me. That was the kind of response I got from the next few I called. Were they really that reluctant to talk about it, or had Ryan warned them?

I could only face so much rejection in one day, so I turned to some of my other work. We went to press the next day, and I needed to finalize the issue. I reminded the police department to send me the weekly blotter and crime report, then called the library to see if they had the "new books this week" list ready for me. "Hi, it's Lexie Lincoln with the *Gazette*," I began when the library director answered the phone.

I didn't get a chance to say more before she said, "I don't want to talk to you," and hung up.

"Okay, that's weird," I said to Charlene. "The library won't talk to me, either. Putting out their list of new books benefits them a lot more than it does me, but you'd have thought I was calling to ask if they'd stopped beating their husbands."

"Wow, you really must have done something awful."

"I didn't do anything! I interviewed one person about selling her family land and made a few other phone calls. This should tell you that your Ryan guy is a crook. He's worried what I'll dig up."

"I'll admit that this is a bit extreme. Want me to call them? They might still be speaking to me."

"Could you? In fact, you may need to make all the usual calls today. How many subscribers have we lost so far?"

"Today? Only about ten."

"And the past two days?"

“Forty-five.”

“Ouch.”

“Don’t let it get to you, kiddo,” Jean said. “Do you know how many times half the town canceled their subscriptions because I did something to make them mad? You should have seen the messages I got during the civil rights movement. We had to drag some of the people in this town into the present kicking and screaming.”

“We did appreciate your efforts on our behalf,” Charlene said.

“They’ll get over it and resubscribe if you put in enough pictures of town events. Do a lawn of the week contest. People will be all over that.”

“Or I could expose Ryan Dobert as a scammer, and then they’ll know why he was trying to undermine me,” I said.

“That works, too,” Jean said. “But don’t hold your breath. They may not appreciate it even if you reveal that they lost thousands of dollars to his scheme.”

“It’ll make them look bad for falling for it,” Charlene added. “People hate that.”

“You’re not saying I should let it slide just because this guy is so slick that people enjoy being scammed by him, are you?”

“Never,” Jean said. “But be aware, it could get sticky for you for a while. You’ve got to be prepared to roll with the punches and take it on the chin.”

With renewed determination, I picked up the phone and called Rebecca Dane’s oldest son, the one who had been running the farm for her and who’d had to sell the cattle when she sold the land. I was sure he’d have a point of view about this. I braced for an ugly response as soon as I identified myself, but he didn’t hang up on me. Instead, he said, “You’re the one who was harassing my mother.”

Surprisingly, he didn’t hang up right after saying that. It took me a second to realize I had the opportunity to speak. “I don’t know where you heard that,” I replied. “I did call her to set up an

interview, and she agreed to it. She invited me to her home. I only asked her a few questions about how she came to sell her family land, what went into the decision, what she felt about it, and what her children thought about it. That's hardly harassment. If she'd told me she didn't want to talk, I'd have stayed away."

"Huh," he said.

Crossing my fingers, I asked tentatively, "What do you think about your family land being sold?"

"It's not really my place to say. It belonged to my mother, and it was a lot for her to deal with. She's better off where she is. And I would appreciate it if you'd leave my family alone. It was a difficult decision for her, and she doesn't need to have it called into question." He hung up before I could say anything else.

I had to psych myself up before I could attempt another call. I got up and put on the electric kettle. If anything called for a cup of tea, this was it. "No luck?" Charlene asked.

"Nope."

"The library is sending over the info."

"Thanks. You may have to be the interface with the town for the time being, if we want to get a newspaper out. Fortunately, we've got that picture of the car being pulled out of the river for the front page." I immediately winced, realizing how ghoulish I sounded, like I was glad two people had died so that I'd have something to put on the front page. Maybe people were right to hate me.

Fortified by a strong cup of tea, I steeled myself to make one more phone call. I'd met this person when I did an earlier story, so she had to know I wasn't a monster, that I didn't harass my interview subjects, and I could be trusted to provide fair coverage. "Mrs. Johnson?" I said when she answered. "Hi, it's Lexie Lincoln, with the newspaper. I interviewed you last month about the craft fair."

"Yes," she said. I thought she sounded a little tentative, but at least she hadn't hung up on me. "I understand your parents

recently sold their property on River Road.”

“How dare you?” she snapped. “It’s none of your business.”

I had to blink away tears as I hung up. “Wow. Who’d have thought I’d touched such a nerve?”

“I’ll admit, this is a bit odd,” Charlene said.

“It’s a pretty strong indication that something is up. You don’t do that level of damage control unless there’s been damage. If those deals had been on the up-and-up, there wouldn’t be any reason to turn everyone against me before I can talk to them.”

“What are you going to do, drop it?”

“No. I just need to go at it from another angle. And get this next issue out. I won’t be able to wrap up this investigation before we go to press, so I might as well let it rest. Jean, do you want to go through the stories we already have?” Having a ghost edit over my shoulder wasn’t my favorite part of the job, but it provided some much-needed distraction. In a weird way, it felt normal. Jean might be dead, but at least she was on my side.

It was good that I had another set of eyes because my mind wasn’t on the work. I was too distracted by thinking about what was really going on with the property sales and whether that had anything to do with the car in the river, and by worrying about what I’d do if I couldn’t prove that Ryan was up to no good. Would I be forced out of town, or would it blow over?

When we finished editing and I sent everything off to layout, I ran another Internet search on Tyler Grant. I got the same articles I’d found earlier, but there was also a new one, an obituary. It was the generic sort of thing funeral homes put together from a form the family fills out, not an actual newspaper article. There wasn’t a lot of new information in it. I already knew when and how he’d died (the obituary phrased it as “an accident”), where he’d gone to school, and where he’d worked. There was something rather astonishing in the list of survivors at the end, though: a wife and children. It didn’t sound like it was an ex. It said he was survived by his wife of eighteen years, Lauren Grant, and his children,

Rachel and Michael.

From the way Margarita had talked about Tiffani, I didn't get the impression that Tiffani had known he was married. Had he been coming to town just to have an affair, so it had nothing to do with the property deals? But, no, Margarita had said Tiffani met her new boyfriend when he came to the Old Mill. He'd been coming to town regularly for some other reason before he started dating Tiffani. If he'd merely been out trolling for an affair, coming to a small town a couple of hours away from home to look for a waitress to hook up with seemed like an odd strategy. I supposed it limited the chances of being seen in public with another woman by someone he knew, but the pickings were also likely to be a lot slimmer than at a singles bar in a big city.

I'd exhausted my resources for looking up information about that development firm that had bought the properties, but I had a friend who was a wizard at digging up that sort of thing. I gave him a call. After going through some casual chit-chat about how things were going in my exile from Dallas, I told him enough about the situation to intrigue him—leaving out the ghosts, of course. He promised to see what he could find. I hung up the phone feeling a little better, but I needed more. A lot more.

The Old Mill seemed to be the connection. Tyler had been going there for some reason when he met Tiffani. Maybe someone there would talk to me. I checked the clock and saw that the lunch rush would likely be ending, and I might be able to catch the lull before dinner. I stood and picked up my purse and a notebook. "I'm heading out to look into something," I told Charlene. "I'm not sure when I'll be back. Not that anyone is likely to be calling for me right now."

"Don't worry, I've got you covered," she said.

"And I'm so glad I have you right now, or we might not have a paper this week."

I probably should have called ahead to the restaurant, but I didn't want to give them the chance to hang up on me. I knew the

current owner was fairly new, so maybe the word about me hadn't yet spread that far. The restaurant was in a real old mill, complete with water wheel, on the shore of the river. I'd only been there once, for a Civic League luncheon back in the day when people had actually been glad to have me in town. The next meeting was in a couple of weeks, and I couldn't help but wonder if I'd be welcome then.

The parking lot at the restaurant was nearly empty when I arrived, barely enough cars there for the staff. When I entered, there were only a couple of tables with diners. A petite, dark-haired woman in a black skirt and white blouse greeted me at the door. "Here for a late lunch?" she asked, reaching for a menu.

"Actually, I was wondering if there's someone who'd be willing to talk to me. I'm Lexie Lincoln, with the *Gazette*." I waited for her to throw up her hands in the shape of a cross to drive me from the restaurant, but she just smiled and nodded. "I wanted to talk to someone about Tiffani Burka."

Her smile faded and her eyes filled with tears. "That poor woman. I hate what happened to her. What did you want to know?"

"Just a little more about her so I can flesh out the story. I need some quotes from her employer."

"I'm Grace Romero. My husband and I own the restaurant. He runs the kitchen and I run the front of the house, so I supervised Tiffani. I'd be happy to talk to you. Just a moment. Oh, and can I get you something to drink?"

"An iced tea?"

"Sure!" She called over to one of the waitresses. "Can you cover the front for me for a while? We shouldn't be too busy." She then went to the wait station and filled a couple of glasses with tea before gesturing with her head for me to follow her. She led me out to the deck. "We can talk out here without being interrupted," she said. "It shouldn't be too warm." She put the drinks on a table and reached to turn on the ceiling fan above the table.

“I’ve wanted to see what it was like out here,” I said as I took a seat at the table. “It’s really nice.”

“You should see it at night, though we did have to install heavy-duty bug zappers and mosquito traps. Now, what did you want to know about Tiffani?”

I started with some of the more usual questions, like how long she’d worked there and what kind of employee she was. “She really was the perfect waitress for a place like this,” Grace said. “She had the professionalism you expect with fine dining, mixed with the down-home friendliness of a local diner waitress. She had a knack for making our customers feel like they were guests in her home. And she was eager to learn so she could do even better.” Her voice broke as she added, “She was registered for a seminar on wine coming up next month. We’re hoping to get a liquor license to sell at least wine and beer, and she wanted to be ready.”

Her grief seemed genuine, which made me feel a little bad that I was only talking to her to investigate Tyler, but I reminded myself that I was trying to get justice for Tiffani and said, “I understand she met the man in the car with her here.”

“Yes, he’d been a regular customer, and he and Tiff really hit it off. I think they might have been starting to get serious.”

“Was he here on business of some sort? I understand he was from Dallas.”

“I’m not sure what his business was, but he ate lunch with different groups of people each time.”

My pulse quickened a little as I asked, “Which people? Did you know them?”

“I’m afraid not. As I said, we’re new here. Most of them were old, though. But there was one guy who was usually with him at those lunches. The waitresses called him Robert Redford.”

That had to be Ryan Dobert.

Chapter Nine

It took all my self-control not to jump up, pump my fist, and shout, “Yes! I knew it.” Instead, I said, “Did no one get his name? I was hoping to interview some of Tiffani’s regular customers.”

“I’m afraid not. The other guy, the one who died, was the one who made reservations and paid, so he’s the only name we’d have on record. I could check with some of the wait staff. Most of them are local, so they might know who he was.”

The last thing I needed was word getting back to Ryan that I’d been asking about him, so I hurried to say, “Don’t worry about it. Did Tiffany’s boyfriend come in on Sunday night, the night of the accident?”

“We’re not open on Sunday nights. We just have a Sunday brunch that lasts until three. Tiff worked that shift, and then she left.” She sniffled. “That’s the last time I saw her. He wasn’t in here that day.”

That made me wonder whether he’d been in town on business or if he’d come just to see Tiffani. If they hadn’t left from the restaurant where she worked, what were they doing on the River Road? There weren’t any hotels or restaurants out there.

We chatted a little more about Tiffani before I thanked her for her time and left. Now I knew for certain that Ryan and Tyler were in cahoots. Surely there weren’t two men in this town who resembled a younger Robert Redford. I could hardly wait to call Wes to tell him he really needed to look into Ryan. But wouldn’t he

have found the same thing in his investigation? Surely he'd have talked to Tiffani's employer and found out about the business lunches. But would he have known to ask about who else was at those lunches? They were only suspicious if you had other information, and unless Wes had followed up today, he wouldn't have known the right questions to ask before I told him about Ryan. I felt like I needed more before I could call Wes about this again, lest I look like I was harassing Ryan.

I didn't have time to do much more work on the case when I got back to the office because I had newspaper work to do. I added some of Grace's comments about Tiffani to the article about the accident. I felt I owed it to Tiffani, and I didn't want Grace to feel like I'd interviewed her under false pretenses. Fortunately, Charlene had already made all the calls to track down our regular contributors because I had a feeling I wouldn't be able to get anyone to talk to me, even about something as simple as getting items for the community calendar. In fact, if I happened to answer the phone before Charlene did, the caller generally hung up. I gave up even trying to answer the phone.

I'd just finalized the paper the next afternoon and sent it to press when my friend in Dallas called. "They really covered their tracks with that company," he said. "It's a joint venture between two entirely unrelated companies, and I had to dig a bit before I got actual names connected to them."

"Let me guess, one of them was Tyler Grant."

"Wrong. Not even close. Try Lauren Phillips."

That blew my theories. "Really?"

"Yep. And that company is an interior design firm. That's the name on the incorporation documents and bank accounts. There's not much in those accounts, by the way. And there are no bank loans on record that I could find. Not what you expected?"

"I'm not sure." Now that I thought about it, there was something familiar there. I quickly pulled up Tyler Grant's obituary. There it was; his wife's name was Lauren. Was that the

same person? Was his wife in on it? “They’ve been buying up a lot of land, so maybe that’s where their money went.”

“How much land? Because there aren’t any big transactions, just eight of several thousand each.”

“Like down payments?”

“They’d be really small down payments for real estate.”

“What was the other company?”

“It was something to do with health supplements, and that one was in the name of Miranda Dobert.”

“Miranda?”

“That’s what it said.”

That person had to be related to Ryan. I wondered if it was his wife or maybe his mother. “Sanity check here, but am I stretching to find all this kinda fishy?”

He laughed. “Not at all. I’d have to see specifics of contracts to know whether or not it’s actually illegal, but I would imagine that your average law student or even a rookie Realtor would never let anyone do business with an outfit set up this way. Let me guess, it was old people involved.”

“Yep, and one of the guys doing the deals is a popular local guy. Do you have any documentation you can e-mail me, or is all of this the kind of info you got off the record?”

“I can send you the articles of incorporation. Those are in the public record. The trick was digging down past a few shells to find the right record. The bank info you didn’t get from me, and I didn’t get it from the person I got it from.”

“Gotcha. Thanks.”

After I hung up, I leaned back in my chair, thinking. Lauren wasn’t exactly a rare name, but it wasn’t super common, either. What were the odds of there being a woman named Lauren who was on the paperwork for a company buying up properties and a different woman named Lauren married to a man associated with a man who was really cozy with the people who’d sold the property? And the odds of someone with the same last name as the person

trying to get me blacklisted in town also being involved were astronomical. Was this enough to go to Wes with?

I got up and put on the electric kettle. This kind of thinking required tea, and not just a bag in a mug. I needed the big guns. I measured loose tea into the pot's infuser insert and poured boiling water over it, then set the timer on my phone. By the time the timer went off, I still didn't have an answer. I poured myself a cup and offered some to Charlene, then sat at my desk, my hands wrapped around the mug. The warmth and steam coming from the cup shouldn't have been so pleasant on a hot June day, but it helped me think.

Unfortunately, it didn't give me a solution. I knew in my gut that I was on the right track, and my gut was almost always right. That's how I'd earned the nickname of "Lucky Lexie." I had a knack for stumbling into things, and that was because I listened to my gut. In this case, though, my credibility had already been questioned. Reporting something Wes had already debunked would make me sound like the girl who cried wolf, and pretty soon no one would listen to me. On the other hand, if I knew something and didn't tell Wes, he'd accuse me of withholding information.

I decided that I had to tell, but I'd do it unofficially, merely sharing some thoughts with Wes as a friend, not making an official police report. I was psyching myself up to call his cell phone soon after Charlene left for the day when he showed up at the newspaper office. "Okay, did whatever mental shields I have slip?" I asked him. "Because I was just about to call you."

"It sounds like you've been calling a lot of people."

This sounded like a conversation that would require more tea. I got up from my desk to pour myself another cup as he lowered himself into my guest chair. "Tea?" I offered, but I was relieved when he declined because there was only one cup left in the pot. I resumed my seat. "Calling whom?" I asked.

"I've had some complaints about telephone harassment. You were calling the children of the people who'd already said they

didn't want to talk."

"I don't know if this is a legal definition, but in the dictionary, it's only harassment if you contact the person repeatedly after they've asked you not to. You've got to be able to call once because otherwise how would you know whether or not someone's willing to talk? If you call once, they don't want to talk, and you leave them alone, it's not harassment. Is anyone saying I'm calling more than once?"

He adjusted his collar and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Well, no. I think their problem was that you were calling their kids after they'd declined to talk."

"If someone hangs up on me, how am I supposed to know that means I'm to stay away from their entire family? Their kids are adults, so their parents have no say over their lives anymore. And don't you find it suspicious that this matter is apparently so sensitive that they call the police over one phone call? Someone really doesn't want me talking to anyone about this. Is that the way an innocent person acts?"

"An innocent person whose integrity is being questioned might react that way."

"Gee, I wonder what that's like," I said dryly. "But I haven't had a chance to question anyone's integrity. If people hang up on me right away before even learning what I want to talk about, that sounds more to me like someone's hiding something. And from what I've learned, someone is up to something."

"Do tell," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, I did some digging into the company that's on record as buying all that land on the River Road, and it's a joint venture between a firm owned by someone who has the same first name as Tyler Grant's wife and someone whose last name is Dobert."

"That's mildly interesting, not necessarily relevant."

"You're not surprised he had a wife?"

"We did have to make the official notification."

"Do you know a Miranda Dobert?"

“She’s Ryan’s mother.”

“Well, she owns one of the firms in the joint venture, but it’s some kind of health products company.”

“Yeah, he was into one of those multilevel marketing things a while back, selling vitamins. The problem was, he was so good at recruiting that everyone who was interested in the product also signed up to sell the stuff, so no one was selling to anyone but themselves. He must have registered the business under his mom’s name to avoid liability.”

“And you don’t think that’s shady?”

“Shady isn’t the same thing as real estate fraud.”

“Okay, how about this: According to the owner of the Old Mill, Tyler Grant was having business lunches there with different groups of old people and a guy she described as looking kind of like Robert Redford. Sound like anyone we know?”

“Yes, I’m aware of who Grant was meeting with. Margarita told me Tiffani met her boyfriend at the Old Mill, and I talked to the staff there as a routine part of the investigation. You’re not the only person around here who knows how to pursue a case. Are you still suggesting that Ryan killed Tiffani and Grant?”

“I’m not suggesting any such thing. This may or may not have anything to do with the car wreck, other than bringing me in contact with a ghost who was angry at Ryan. But I do think there’s something shady about those land deals, and he’s paranoid enough about it that he’s pulled out all the stops to keep me from investigating anything and to ruin my credibility with the town in case I do find something.”

“I have a hard time seeing Ryan as that evil.”

“The man’s trying to destroy me because I asked a question. He’s already turned much of the town against me. No one will take my calls right now. I had to get Charlene to call just to get the list of new books from the library and the activity calendar from the senior center.”

“That may not have anything to do with Ryan. You know, you

don't always make a great impression."

I felt like he'd kicked me in the gut. "What?"

"You can be a bit blunt sometimes. You don't make much of an effort to make friends with the people you talk to, especially when you're interviewing someone. You go straight to what you want out of them."

"Takes one to know one," I countered. It was childish and a cliché, but I was too stunned to do better at the moment. I'd probably come up with the ideal comeback at about three in the morning. And when I did, I'd text it to him. "I recall your interviewing style."

"You were a suspect. I wasn't trying to get you on my side, and you had to talk to me, unless you wanted to bring in a lawyer. But you're trying to get people to cooperate when they don't have to if they don't want to. I'm just saying, being friendly can go a long way in a town like this. Get to know people before you start interrogating them."

I tried to think of my interviewing style. I didn't waste a lot of time with chit-chat, but was I that bad? Well, maybe when I suspected someone. I hadn't made any effort to make Ryan like me when he showed up at that interview, but I'd had good reason to believe he was up to no good.

"I haven't had any complaints before, not in my whole career."

"You were in a very different environment. You're the newcomer here, so you have to win people over. If you go up against a well-liked local like Ryan, you're probably not going to win unless you make a real effort. They've known him most of his life. You've been around here for a few months. Who do you think they're going to side with? He's had years to win loyalty. You can't just come in and start accusing someone like that of shady dealings and expect people to listen to you."

"I haven't accused him to anyone but you. He assumed I was out to get him just because I was talking to someone he did business with, which suggests a guilty conscience. And I still think

he's got some kind of talent that makes people loyal to him."

"All the more reason you need to approach this a different way."

"Is that why you're treading so lightly? And don't tell me that's how you always work because I know from experience that's not true."

"You haven't seen me tread heavily, trust me. In this case, yes, I am being careful because it never does much good to go full-bore on someone who's well-liked in town when you don't have any real evidence. It wouldn't hurt you to take a similar approach. What do you know about the people you called, other than that they sold their land? Heck, what do you know about the people you consider friends? Did you know Margarita had a friend named Tiffani until I asked about her? Have you even talked to Margarita since then—not to interview her about her friend but as a friend?"

I wanted to get mad at him, to be outraged that he'd dare say such a thing to me, but I had to admit that he was right, and the truth, spoken sincerely, with no malice, hurt more than any insult could have. Several potential responses crossed my mind, most of them defensive—claiming that I was doing something more important in getting justice for Margarita's friend, or I was busy, or it hadn't been that long, or I was giving her space. But the truth was, it hadn't even crossed my mind.

"You're right," I admitted. "I got so caught up in getting justice for her friend, and that led me to wanting to get justice for people I thought have been cheated, and from there I just wanted to take down Ryan Dobert, and I totally forgot that there were people involved—people I care about." I put down my tea mug and rubbed my temples. The press had kicked in, printing the next issue, and although today's computerized press was much quieter than what they'd used in Jean's day, it still wasn't conducive to conversation or thought around the building when it was running.

"I guess it also matters that I'm part of the community and have to stay friends with these people," I said. "At my old job, I'd

probably never see the people I was writing about again after I was done with the story. Thanks for the wake-up call.”

He couldn't have looked more stunned if I'd slapped him. “No, I was probably over the line,” he said. “I'm sorry. I have a bad habit of taking things out on you, probably because I don't have to hear what you think of me.” He gave a slight smile. “That is, unless you tell me, which you usually do.”

“In this case, you were right. That doesn't mean I enjoyed hearing it, but I needed the wake-up call. Thanks for being willing to be honest with me. And now I think I'm going to head to Margarita's. I owe her an apology, and I need to get out of here while the press is running.”

“How do you deal with it? That sound would drive me crazy.”

“Have you noticed that I tend to go out to dinner and a movie every Thursday night? Usually they're through by the time the movie is over. Press day is one time when living over the office isn't so much fun.”

I put my computer to sleep and picked up my purse. He followed me out the door, which I locked. “You going to dinner?” I asked as I turned to head toward Margarita's.

“It's the busy time, so no. I'll see you around, Lex.” He gave me a mock salute, which I returned before I made my way down the sidewalk. I felt surprisingly good for someone who'd just had a dressing-down from a friend. The good feeling turned to a sinking weight of dread when I opened the restaurant door. Did Margarita feel the same way about me that Wes did?

If she did, she didn't show it, unlike a number of restaurant patrons who glared daggers at me as I crossed the room. “Hey, Lex,” she greeted me when I took my usual seat at the bar. “How are you doing?”

“I think the real question is, how are *you* doing? I should have thought to check in on you after you lost a friend. But it seems I kind of suck as a friend. I'm sorry.”

“You're busy, I know.” She winced and glanced around before

adding, "And I understand you really have been busy, in a way that's making people unhappy."

"Wow, word really has gotten around. I'm surprised you're willing to speak to me."

"I know you don't harass old people. You're after a story."

"Maybe."

"Does it have something to do with how Tiff died?"

"It may not be directly connected to her death, but something around her death tipped me off."

Her eyebrows rose. "Interesting."

"But enough about me. How are you, really? Is there anything you need? And I'm not just saying that in a general platitude way. Name something specific that you need, and I'll do it."

She leaned her elbows on the bar and frowned. "Okay, if you really mean that, there is one thing . . ."

"I do mean it."

"I don't want to go to the funeral tomorrow by myself. It's just a graveside service, no sitting in a church or funeral home, or anything like that. But I hate going to these things alone."

I had to swallow the lump that had formed in my throat. She had no idea how big a request that was for me. I'd always hated cemeteries because they tended to be infested with ghosts. I hadn't always known that was what I was seeing, and knowing didn't make it any better. If I was going to be a real friend, though, I could get over my discomfort. It would be broad daylight, which would cut down on the ghosts, and I'd already confronted some of the worst ghosts in that cemetery. "Sure, I could do that. When is it?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, at two. I know you probably have to work."

"Actually, that's my light day. I don't have anything scheduled, and no one will talk to me right now, anyway. Yeah, I'll go with you, assuming you aren't worried about people throwing things at us because they hate me."

“I don’t think that’ll be a huge problem.”

“I’ll drive. I can pick you up.”

“I’m just down the street. I’ll come by the office, say about one thirty?”

“Sounds good.”

She gave a slight smile. “And prepare yourself. I suspect it will be a bit unconventional. Now, what can I get you for dinner?”

After I gave my order and she went to turn it in to the kitchen, it occurred to me that the funeral might also be a good place to look for suspects.

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Chapter Ten

I'd worn flats to the funeral because I didn't want my heels sinking into the soft ground, but I was really glad I'd done so when the closest available parking was at the park adjacent to the cemetery, so we had to walk nearly a quarter mile. It seemed like the whole town was there. I wondered how much of it was because all these people knew and loved Tiffani and how much was because of the way she'd died, which turned this into a morbid curiosity news event. Maybe I should have assigned a photographer. Would that have come across as respectful of the importance of the event, or ghoulish? Probably half the town would have felt one way and half the other, so I couldn't have won. And, I reminded myself, I was here for Margarita, not for work.

"I really appreciate you coming here with me, Lexie," Margarita said as we approached the cemetery gates. "I know it sounds childish, but I'm a little afraid of cemeteries, and I hate funerals. I think I may have been scarred by my abuela going on about *Dia de los Muertos* when I was too young to understand it. I thought all my ancestors' skeletons were going to come after me, and that's still the mental image I have when I go to a cemetery, even though I understand it a lot better now and I think it's a beautiful tradition." I noticed that she looked a bit pale under her light brown complexion.

"Oh, I totally get not liking cemeteries," I said, bracing myself

to enter the graveyard. There were a lot of people clustered around the open grave, and I hoped that would scare the ghosts away. I noticed traces of the faint mist I usually saw wafting around graveyards, and on a warm, sunny afternoon I suspected it wasn't a natural occurrence that everyone else saw. It was ghosts that were only tenuously connected to what remained of their earthly bodies. I was afraid they were drawn by curiosity about the living rather than repelled by the crowd. Knowing what that mist was only made matters worse for me, but I resisted the impulse to turn and flee. I was here for my friend.

There had been police directing traffic at the entrance to the drive that led to the park and cemetery, and there was another police vehicle in the cemetery itself, parked next to the hearse. Wes stood nearby, in uniform and looking like he was on alert. I wondered how official his presence was. He'd graduated with Tiffani, so was he there as a friend, was he providing security or a police escort, or was he keeping an eye—and his mental ear—on potential suspects? Probably all of the above, I decided. He nodded to us as we passed him, but his dark sunglasses made it hard for me to tell just how friendly—or not—his expression was. I hoped the fact that I was here with Margarita would prove to him that I'd listened to what he'd said. Or did he think I was only using her as a cover for my investigation?

A small pavilion had been set up near the open grave. I guessed those sitting in the chairs under it were close family members. There appeared to be two distinct groups, on either side of an aisle, like at a wedding, but instead of the bride's side and the groom's side, it looked like it was the mother's side and the father's side, and the truce declared for this one occasion didn't mean they had to actually speak to or even acknowledge each other. The waves of hostility coming out of that pavilion were practically tangible. Garlands of white roses wound up the pavilion's poles, and the folding chairs had been draped in white slipcovers with bows and more white roses on the backs of the chairs. Still more white roses

were arranged as topiaries in pots around the gravesite. With that aisle down the middle and all the white bows and roses, it looked like someone had mixed up their “June wedding” and “funeral” Pinterest boards. I halfway expected to see someone in white come walking down that aisle. With the pavilion surrounded by so many graves, it was entirely possible that it would happen, but I was likely to be the only person who could see it.

“Do you want to get up close?” I asked Margarita.

She shook her head. “Nope. I really don’t want to get a good look at that open hole in the ground, and I definitely don’t want to go anywhere near that family. Tiff was doing her best to distance herself from them. What about over there in the shade?” She pointed to one of the cemetery’s few trees, which was across from all the action, behind the gathered mourners facing the pavilion from the opposite side of the grave.

“Sounds good to me,” I said. I’d worn a wide-brimmed hat to protect myself from the sun, but it would still be a lot more pleasant to stand in the shade. We crossed the cemetery, skirting the crowd. Along the way, Margarita was greeted by a number of people. I was surprised by how little hostility I faced. Either none of these people were in Ryan’s orbit or they didn’t recognize me with my hat and sunglasses. I doubted that many people in town yet knew me on sight. I’d avoided putting my picture in the newspaper, so unless they’d met me in person, they weren’t likely to have any idea that I was the town pariah unless someone called me by name.

Which someone immediately did. “Margarita, Lexie, hey!” Jordan Randall said, coming over to join us. He’d been in Tiffani’s graduating class, though I had a hard time imagining that they’d run in any of the same circles. Wes, at least, had been a bit of a jock, so he might have known a cheerleader, but Jordan had been pure nerd. That made me wonder if he was here for some other reason. I was pretty sure Wes was way out of line and getting ridiculous with the theory that Jordan might have run Tyler Grant

and Tiffani off the road because the River Road development would compete with his downtown efforts, but I also knew that Jordan was physically incapable of turning off the business part of his brain, so it was likely he was working some angle, even if it was just being seen as a supportive member of the community. “How are you holding up?” he asked Margarita. “I know you two were good friends.”

I couldn’t help but wince at the reminder of what a terrible friend I’d been to have let myself forget that Margarita had suffered a loss. “It still doesn’t feel real,” she said. “I hadn’t heard a lot from her lately, but I still feel like I might get a call from her to go shopping at any moment. I was just getting used to her not working with me. Maybe I’ll keep imagining she’s still out at the Old Mill.”

He turned to me. “I guess this is the story of the week, huh?”

Margarita hooked her arm around mine. “Lexie came because I didn’t want to come by myself. I hate funerals.”

“I’m totally off-duty today,” I said. “Though if something newsworthy happens, I retain the right to write an eyewitness account.”

“With some of these people, that may be likely,” Margarita said softly. “Wes isn’t just here to provide a police escort.”

“Do you have any theories about what happened?” Jordan asked me.

“A few,” I said, “but this isn’t the place to discuss it.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Wes. That sounded a lot like ‘I’m not at liberty to discuss an ongoing investigation.’”

“More like it’s tacky to discuss who might have killed a person at their funeral, and my investigation into circumstances surrounding the death has already made me a few enemies. I’d rather not make any more.”

“Oh, now that’s interesting,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “We’ll have to catch up later in a better place to discuss it all.”

Jordan moved on to greet someone else, and I felt like more

eyes were on us as we made our way to the shady spot. I didn't think I was imagining that the glares were unfriendly now that people knew who I was. Someone would look at me, glare, then whisper to the adjacent person, who would turn toward me and glare. Based on the way Wes had relayed the complaints he'd been getting about me, I was sure the word around town was that I was berating and manipulating old people and slandering beloved local golden boy Ryan Dobert. "Are you sure being seen in public with me is a good idea?" I whispered to Margarita. "It might be bad for your business."

"I don't think it's that bad, is it? It'll blow over. And if they want Mexican food, it's either me or that chain place near the motel on the edge of town, where I have it on good authority they get trays of frozen enchiladas from a centralized supplier, and all they do is heat them up. You might as well nuke a TV dinner at home. Even if they start a boycott, they'll be back." She kept her arm firmly locked around mine, and I felt a warm glow fill my body. I kept forgetting that the friendship thing worked in both directions. I could support her, and she could back me.

I was afraid, though, that this would work like military life, and just as soon as I started to settle in and make connections, I'd have to move. Did Ryan really have the pull to drive me out of town? I had to get the goods on him to show that I was the one who was right, and then maybe people would talk to me again—and I'd be able to keep my job.

The shady spot we found gave us a good view of all the action while being far enough away that we were out of earshot of most of the other mourners, who were clustered closer to the grave. A few had brought their own folding camp chairs. A couple of children raced around the area, and I was surprised that no one reacted to them. Their parents might have let them run wild, but surely someone would give them a disapproving scowl. Then it occurred to me that they might be ghosts. My heart gave a little wrench at the thought of dead children. At least they seemed to be

enjoying themselves in the afterlife.

People continued to stream in. With this big a crowd, I wondered why they hadn't done the more typical service at a church or funeral home for most of the mourners and a smaller graveside service for the family. It wasn't my place to critique, though. They must have had their reasons. According to the newspaper obituary, Tyler Grant's funeral had been this morning, and it had been in one of the big Dallas churches, probably in stark contrast to just about everything I was about to see.

Although I was truly here to support Margarita, I scanned the crowd for likely suspects. Not that I had any other than Ryan, who didn't seem to be there. I didn't notice anyone looking guilt-stricken, like they knew they were responsible but couldn't bring themselves to come clean. There also wasn't anyone barely hiding a smirk of triumph, like they were enjoying watching the grief and knew they were getting away with murder.

The rumble of chatter died down as a young woman wearing a fringed dress and cowboy boots slung a guitar strap over her shoulder and stepped up to a PA system microphone set up in front of the pavilion. She played a few chords, then began to sing. Her voice was nice, but I couldn't tell if she'd hastily rewritten a song to make it about Tiffani or if she'd thrown together something just for the occasion. Either way, the tribute was earnest, but not particularly good. A couple of people applauded awkwardly, like they weren't sure what was appropriate for the occasion. It seemed weird to clap at a funeral, but the silence after a performance was uncomfortable. After the opening song, a bagpiper in a fire department dress uniform began to play. I wasn't sure what he was playing. I wasn't even sure it was music. I was no musician, but I didn't think this was in any particular key or scale. I wasn't the only one wincing. I noticed a number of people rubbing their ears, and the ghostly children and most of the mist disappeared. If I ever wanted to clear out ghosts, I now knew how to do it. I just needed an unskilled bagpiper. That made me wonder if the Scots had been

doing that on purpose all along.

“Oh, dear, this wasn’t at all what I expected,” a woman standing near me said. “They couldn’t have done this at the funeral home? Or were they too cheap for that?”

While the piper played, a man in a dark suit opened the rear door of the hearse, and the pallbearers brought out a white casket draped in a blanket of white roses, carrying it on their shoulders to the stand placed next to the grave. The woman with the guitar stepped forward again, and she and the piper played a duet. At least, I assumed they intended to play together. It was entirely possible that the piper was unaware the guitarist was playing. I doubted he could hear her over the noise of his instrument. It sounded like they were playing different songs in different keys with different tempos. The piper won the race, finishing first.

“No, oh no,” the woman beside me said, shaking her head. “What were they thinking? I’m touched that Dave was willing to play, but he’s only just started learning. You don’t inflict a beginning bagpiper on people at a funeral. Everyone’s already sad enough without any help.”

I couldn’t help but snicker, since I agreed with her. It was a real case of “if you can’t say anything nice, come stand by me so we can dish together.”

“What?” Margarita whispered.

I glanced at the woman beside me, then back at Margarita. Had she not heard the woman? She hadn’t made any effort to speak softly. Then I looked at the woman again. She looked somewhat familiar. Where had I seen her before? She was about average height, with golden blond hair falling around her shoulders in what magazines would call beachy waves, looking effortlessly tousled in a way that probably took at least half an hour of effort to achieve without getting the kind of frizz that came from natural curls or real wind and salt water. She was dressed more for an evening out than for a funeral, in a short, snug dress with a deep cleavage. I wasn’t sure how she managed to walk or stand on grass

in shoes with such high, skinny heels. She had to be tiptoeing, and if she hadn't spent years in ballet her legs would be killing her by the end of the funeral.

Then it occurred to me: She looked just like the picture the funeral home had sent to the newspaper with Tiffani's obituary, or else like a slightly older version of the girl I'd seen in yearbook pictures. Tiffani herself was here watching her own funeral.

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Chapter Eleven

I had to clasp my hands together to keep them from flapping in excitement. There might not have been any suspects present, but there was something even better, the ultimate witness—the victim. Maybe she’d seen the vehicle that hit them. She might even know something about the land scheme and be willing to spill now that she and her boyfriend were both dead. Unfortunately, I couldn’t exactly interview her while I was surrounded by people in the middle of her funeral. For one thing, it would be rude to the mourners to disrupt the proceedings, and for another it would be rude to distract her from what was going on. If she wanted to watch her own funeral, she had the right to see and hear it all. And then there was that “talking to thin air in public” issue that wouldn’t help my already tattered reputation.

But there was a chance that she’d disappear after the funeral. Most people didn’t seem to stick around long after their deaths. They went on to the next plane of existence, and a funeral provided the kind of closure that allowed someone to move on. It was only people with really strong ties or unfinished business who stayed around. Tiffani might vanish as soon as her body was buried. Fortunately, that part tended to happen after everyone left the cemetery, so I might have a chance after the funeral to talk to her, and she might stay after that for the opportunity to get some kind of justice. Dying in a sudden accident just as she was getting her life together was pretty much the definition of unfinished

business.

It was hard to focus on the funeral service while the guest of honor was standing right beside me, especially one who had strong opinions about what was happening and kept up a running commentary. “You asked *him* to speak, really?” she said when a man in faded jeans and a suit jacket stepped up to give the eulogy. “My brother sided with my ex when I left an abusive marriage.”

“Tiff was a real firecracker who didn’t put up with anything,” her brother said. “In fact, I bet she’s up in heaven right now, critiquing this funeral.”

“You don’t know the half of it, Larry,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“She left a husband who wasn’t good enough for her.”

“Yeah, I’m picky about things like not being allowed to leave the house unless he went with me. It’s a flaw. But you know who got it? My in-laws. Blake’s sister was more sympathetic than my own brother was.”

“And I don’t think I ever gave her a gift she didn’t return.”

“Because you have bad taste, Larry, and you never bothered to get my size right. Size eight is not queen-sized, no matter what your wife says.”

“But I’m still going to miss her, I guess.”

“I thought you were supposed to say something nice at a person’s funeral,” Tiffani said. “I ought to haunt you and make you feel guilty.”

After that speaker came a pair of women about Tiffani’s age who talked about sisterhood in a generic sort of way. “Seriously? We haven’t spoken in two years,” Tiffani said with a snort. “You wouldn’t have anything to do with me, and now you’re chief mourners? You’re calling me a sister? You just can’t resist the spotlight, can you?” The women got out cans of Silly String and sprayed the coffin. “What the hell?” Tiffani shouted. “That is so inappropriate.” There were enough uncomfortable coughs that I got the impression a lot of the mourners agreed with her.

A woman who looked like an older version of Tiffani, dressed very much like her, got up from her seat in the pavilion and pulled those women away from the coffin. The man who'd been sitting next to her went to the coffin and wiped it down with his handkerchief, which only made more of a mess. He spit on the handkerchief and tried again. If Tiffani hadn't already been dead, she'd have probably keeled over from a stroke or a heart attack upon seeing the desecration. "No, Walt, no! Just stop!" she begged. "And what were you doing letting those bitches anywhere near my coffin, anyway? You had to know they'd do something foolish like that. They never had a lick of sense."

It became more and more difficult to keep from laughing out loud. I felt a pang of loss that I'd never met Tiffani because she seemed like she'd have been fun. I'd missed out on a lot by not being a better friend to Margarita. What if I'd put together a girls' day out and encouraged her to invite a friend? I could have had a chance to meet and become friends with Tiffani. She struck me as someone who laughed out loud without worrying about who might hear her. The next speaker, trying to go on while ignoring the efforts to clean the coffin, mentioned that Tiffani loved with all her heart and was the kind of friend who'd help you move a dead body.

"Depends on whose body it was," Tiffani said, and I had to bite the inside of my lip to keep from sputtering with inappropriate laughter.

"Are you okay?" Margarita whispered to me.

"Yeah. It's just funeral giggles threatening to burst out."

"You, too? This is getting a bit ridiculous, I must admit. And once you think about it, it gets even harder to hold back."

And it was even more difficult when you had the deceased providing running commentary right next to you.

"I don't know who planned this, but I don't think Tiff had much to do with any of these people," Margarita whispered.

"Yeah, they should have had you talk," Tiffani said. "You knew

me better than any of them. Or Grace could have talked. Either of you could have said things about what a great waitress I was and how I got to know my customers.” I remembered the way Grace had talked about her and had to agree.

I didn’t get the impression that Tiffani knew I could hear her. I wasn’t even sure she was aware of my presence, though she had noticed Margarita. She was too focused on watching the funeral. I supposed that was one good thing—she knew she was dead, so this wasn’t coming as a shock to her. I could only imagine how awful it would be to find out you were dead by seeing your own funeral.

Tiffani began critiquing the people among the mourners, those she was surprised to see at her funeral because they’d never had a kind thing to say to her, those who’d only been her friends when they needed something, those who weren’t there for her when she was alive but at least had shown up for her after she was dead. That got me started scanning the crowd again, as well. Could the person who’d killed her be here, maybe someone I hadn’t considered as a suspect? She hadn’t said anything about someone having the nerve to show up for her funeral after killing her, and I had a feeling she definitely would have said something about it if she knew her killer and if that person were at the funeral.

She was touched that a few of her high school cheerleading squad members were there, along with some of her teachers. Margarita got praise, as did a few of her fellow waitresses from both Margarita’s and the Old Mill. Grace wasn’t there, but Tiffani figured she’d stayed at the restaurant to work so the rest of the staff could attend the funeral. The high-roller business lunches would still be lingering.

The speeches finally ended, and I braced myself when I saw the piper step forward again. After some wheezing from the pipes, music finally came out and I recognized “Amazing Grace.” He actually played it fairly well and more or less in tune, and it was quite moving. My eyes stung with tears, and Tiffani went silent, not criticizing at all. As the last note died away, there was a

rustling sound, and suddenly a flock of birds swarmed the cemetery as they were released from a box behind the pavilion.

It wasn't the sort of white doves you expect to be released at a ceremony. I really wasn't sure what kinds of birds they were, but I didn't get a good look because I was too busy ducking for cover, and I was glad to be wearing a hat. Let's just say they released some ballast once they got in the air. They dive bombed the people closer to the gravesite, and that sent mourners screaming and running. I suspected there was now more than just the remnants of Silly String sullying Tiffani's coffin. Initially, Margarita and I were safer under the tree, but then some of the birds roosted on the branches. We darted out from under the danger zone. It looked like there were pigeons and maybe a few other kinds of birds, and I doubted they were at all trained to return to their box. They were enjoying the freedom and letting us know, loudly.

"Did someone just scoop up a bunch of birds, put them in a box, and set them loose at my funeral?" Tiffani sputtered.

The birds scattered throughout the cemetery and began poking around, looking for food. Some of them weren't at all afraid of people and came right up to them, like they expected to be fed. People were still screaming and ducking as birds flew back and forth over the grounds in chaos and confusion. I could no longer hold back the laughter I'd been fighting ever since Tiffani's ghost showed up, and I doubled over, shaking with mirth. Fortunately, I wasn't the only one. The people who weren't screaming were laughing. I thought about snapping a few pictures with my phone, but then I decided that might be disrespectful to put in the newspaper. I was already on thin ice with the community and didn't want to push my luck. Whoever had arranged for the birds had probably thought it was a touching tribute, even if they didn't understand how it was supposed to work.

Tiffani got over her anger enough to appreciate the humor of the situation, and she started laughing, too. "I suppose no one will ever forget my funeral," she said. "And I'd rather have folks

laughing than crying. They'll be talking about this for weeks."

A man in a suit went up to the microphone and tried to restore order. "Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, please. May I have your attention?" A few mourners turned to listen to him, but there was still a lot of running around. Some people kept flailing their arms, fending off birds, even though there weren't any around them. Others shared handkerchiefs for cleaning away the mess. "Let us pray," the speaker boomed, and that brought silence and stillness.

I cheated a bit and glanced around during the prayer to observe the mourners. Although everyone was silent, some were still cleaning themselves or shooing away birds who expected a handout. I noticed a newcomer to the cemetery, someone I hadn't seen earlier. She stood just inside the gates, close enough to see what was going on, but not joining in. She was tall and thin, model-like, with her collarbones standing out above the neckline of her boat-neck black sheath dress. She had light brown, highlighted "I want to speak to the manager" hair and oversized designer sunglasses, but the impression of elegance was diminished when she walked farther into the cemetery and struggled to walk across the grass while her stiletto heels sank into the ground with each step.

I didn't recognize her, but I had a feeling I knew who she was, and if I was right, Tyler Grant's widow had come to her husband's girlfriend's funeral.

And I thought the botched bird release had been messy.

Chapter Twelve

Tyler's wife was possibly as good a source of info for the real estate scam as Tiffani was for the car wreck, and I needed to talk to both of them before the funeral ended and people began leaving. But I was here for Margarita, I reminded myself. I wasn't here as part of any investigation. I was here to be a supportive friend to someone who'd had a loss and couldn't face the funeral alone. I couldn't ditch Margarita to go chasing after a possible interview.

Then again, maybe Margarita should have a say in the matter. Surely she'd want her friend to get justice. Under that rationale, I could at least justify talking to Tiffani. Lauren was more of a stretch, but she was also more likely to get away. Or worse, she'd end up in Wes's clutches. The betrayed wife would be pretty high on the suspect list for the death of her husband and his girlfriend. Had Lauren learned about her husband's affair, followed him, and driven him off the road in a fit of rage? Or had she only realized something was going on when she learned that a woman had died in the car with her husband? Was she at the funeral to gloat or to get closure? And what, exactly, was her role in the development firm that had her maiden name (maybe) on the paperwork?

I nudged Margarita. "Check out the woman in black over there."

She glanced, then said, "Wow, she just needs a lace parasol, or maybe a hat with a veil over the face, to be that mysterious woman in black who shows up at a funeral and leaves everyone

wondering.”

“You don’t know her?”

“Never saw her before. She looks very Dallas, though.”

“Yeah, she does. I wonder if she could be Tyler Grant’s wife.”

“He was married?” Both Tiffani and Margarita said it at the same time. A cold wind whipped around us, and Tiffani’s form momentarily dissolved before re-forming right next to us.

“Yeah, according to the obituary,” I said.

“He said he was single!” Tiffani screamed, her face distorting like something from a horror movie.

“I don’t think Tiffani would have broken her dating drought after getting her life back together by going out with a married man,” Margarita said. “She was being really careful about men, avoiding any possible red flags. He must have lied to her, or conveniently hidden the truth.”

“I just thought any weirdness was because he lived in Dallas,” Tiffani said. “That’s why he wasn’t here all the time. He traveled a lot for work, visiting all the places his company had developments.” She frowned. “But he was seldom around on weekends, even when we started dating. I thought it was because I worked weekends, so there was no point, but was he with a family? I should have checked more.” She dissolved again and whipped around us. The wind was so strong that it even blew Margarita’s hair.

Margarita shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. “Brr, I feel like someone just walked over my grave. Being in a cemetery really puts my imagination on overdrive.”

As far as I knew, Margarita didn’t know about my gift with ghosts. One of her grandmothers, who was descended from the carnival’s fortune-teller, was on the newspaper board, but Margarita had always sounded a little dismissive when talking about the uncanny talents associated with the sideshow. I didn’t know how she’d take my claim to be able to talk to ghosts, but my best way out of my present dilemma, now that the funeral was

breaking up in the aftermath of the bird attack, was to come clean. If we were going to really be friends, I had to lower my guard and let her in on the wackiness that was my life.

“Actually, that’s Tiffani,” I said. “She’s here, and she’s not happy. She definitely didn’t know about the wife.”

“What?” Margarita said, looking at me like either I was nuts or was telling a terrible joke.

I took a deep breath and said, “I can see and hear ghosts. For real. I’m not joking.”

Her head jerked slightly in an involuntary flinch of surprise, and her mouth opened and closed silently a few times before she managed to speak. “So, it’s true? I mean, I’d heard stuff about the newspaper and Jean Jacobs still running it, but I thought that was just in a metaphorical sense.”

“It’s true. I’ll tell you all about it later, but right now, Tiffani is here, and we need to get some answers for her.”

“You hear me? You can help me?” Tiffani said, speaking directly to me now. “You didn’t hear all that stuff I was saying earlier, did you?”

“I did, and I agreed with every word,” I told her.

She covered her face with her hands. “Oh, God, what you must think of me. Really, I’m not that big a bitch most of the time.”

“You’re talking to Tiffani right now?” Margarita asked, looking at me askance.

“Yes. She’s been here through the whole ceremony.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. She hated her brother giving the eulogy because he sided with her abusive ex when she left him.”

That seemed to shock her more than my initial confession had. “Wow. You definitely heard her. Tell her I’m sorry she had to see all that.”

“I can hear you,” Tiffani said.

“She can hear you,” I relayed. “The hard part is you being able to hear her.”

“Oh, there’s so much I want to say,” Margarita said, tears trickling from under her sunglasses. “I didn’t think I’d get the chance.” I gently nudged her to turn her in the right direction to face Tiffani. “I hate that we didn’t get to say goodbye, that we didn’t go out much lately. I’m going to miss you so much, but of course I didn’t realize that until you were already gone.”

“Well, it’s not like I planned to end up in the river,” Tiffani said. “We have no way of knowing what’ll happen. Don’t waste the time you have.”

I repeated that to Margarita, then turned to face Tiffani. “I don’t suppose you know exactly what happened, who ran you off the road?”

She shook her head. “Not clearly. I just remember Tyler looking in the mirror and saying that someone was coming up behind us fast. Then he said they weren’t slowing down, weren’t going to pass. He swerved, and the truck swerved around us, but it bumped us, and I’m not sure what happened after that. It was all so fast.”

“Truck? It was definitely a truck?” I asked.

“A white pickup, I’m pretty sure. It was the last thing I remember seeing.”

“Do you know anyone who drives a white pickup?” I asked Margarita.

“Half the town,” she said with a shrug. “That’s what most businesses use.”

“There may have been something written on the side, but I’m not sure,” Tiffani said. “I’d have sworn that Blake was the kind of guy who’d run someone off the road. He was a real jerk behind the wheel. But he always drove black trucks. Even when he could only afford junkers, he’d give them a shiny black paint job. Now, about that wife. If she’s here, she must know about us.”

“She’d have found out when they told her how her husband died,” I said. “I’m sure they’d have asked her questions about how her husband knew you.”

“Oh, gosh, how awful. It would be bad enough to get the news

that her husband was dead, but to learn he was with someone else at the same time . . . I feel terrible. I need to talk to her, to tell her I'm sorry. If I'd known he was married, I wouldn't have gone near him, honest."

"I doubt I'll be able to relay messages to her," I said. "She's not from around here. I won't be able to convince her I'm talking to your ghost. But I would like to talk to her, and maybe I can get some of what you want to say across, somehow." I turned to Margarita. "Are you up for it?"

"Are you kidding? I want to know what the deal is here."

We set off across the cemetery, Tiffani trailing behind us. She moved like she was walking, but her feet skimmed just above the ground. Lauren stood near the gate, her head moving back and forth like she was scanning the cemetery. I wasn't sure what she was looking for. Surely she didn't expect to find her husband's girlfriend anywhere but inside the coffin.

"Lauren?" I said as I approached her.

She turned toward me, frowning. "Do I know you?" she asked.

From up close, I could see tear tracks in her makeup. I imagined that if she took off her sunglasses, her eyes would be red and puffy. "No," I admitted. "But I know a lot about what was going on. I'm the town newspaper editor." Before she could respond, I held up a hand in a "pause" motion. "And I'm not working on a story right now. I just know enough to know that there's a lot of closure needed all around."

She gave a shaky laugh that turned into a sob. "Well, if you know what's going on, maybe you could fill me in, because I have no clue whatsoever. I only know that they found my husband's car in the river with another woman in it. I don't know who she was or what was going on or even why he was here. He told me he was out of town on business, but his office didn't know anything about it. All I could think about through his funeral was that our whole life must have been a lie. He wasn't the person I thought he was, and we didn't have the marriage I thought we had. When I got in

my car after the funeral, I started driving, and I ended up here. If you can tell me anything, I'll be better off than I was."

I would have invited her back to my office so I could offer her a cup of tea for this kind of conversation, but Tiffani needed to be here for this. "This is Margarita Reyes," I said. "She was Tiffani's friend."

"Tiffani," Lauren said with a snort. "How clichéd can you get?"

"Hey!" Tiffani protested.

"She wasn't that type at all," Margarita said. "She didn't know he was married. He was in town on business a lot, and he was a regular customer at the restaurant where she worked. That's how they met. She was just starting to feel like it might get serious. He was the first guy she'd dated since she left her abusive husband years ago."

"So you're saying that the slut who was sleeping with my husband wasn't a slut?" Lauren said.

"I wasn't sleeping with him," Tiffani insisted. "I might have that night, if we hadn't ended up in the river, but I hadn't yet. I was taking it slow."

"She wasn't sleeping with him," I said. Margarita shot me a glance and raised her eyebrows. "She was taking it slow."

"Well, that's a relief," Lauren said with a snort. "At least I won't have to worry about getting tested for STDs."

"Do you know what business your husband was doing in town?" I asked.

"He worked in real estate. He was setting up some kind of deal. We didn't talk much about work." She gave a bitter little laugh. "We didn't talk much about anything. Maybe that should have been a sign."

"Since he wasn't here for his employer, was he here doing a deal for your company?"

"My company?"

"El Rio Development."

"I'm an interior designer. I don't have a development

company.”

“The development firm was a joint venture involving your company. Your name is on the paperwork for the business. Your maiden name is Phillips, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is, but . . .” She shook her head. “What’s all this about?”

“I think it’s pretty complicated.”

Tiffani had lost interest while we were talking about business and had returned to scanning the crowd, probably taking attendance. “Wait a second, where the hell is Blake? That son of a bitch couldn’t be bothered to come to my funeral? I’d have gone to his.”

“I’m not involved in any development company,” Lauren said. “Did that son of a bitch stick his shady real estate deals on my business to cover his tracks? If he weren’t already dead, I’d kill him myself.”

“You and me both, sister,” Tiffani said. “I wonder if I can kick him in the afterlife. And if it will hurt him when I do.”

“Is that a confession, ma’am?” Wes asked, joining us. “You are Lauren Grant, are you not? I’ve been trying to reach you.”

“My husband’s funeral was this morning. I was busy,” she said.

“I’m Lieutenant Mosby, Stirling Mills Police Department, and I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Ask away,” she said with a laugh that sounded a little unhinged. I could hardly blame her.

“To begin with, do you know what your husband was doing in Stirling Mills on Sunday evening?”

“He had a meeting Monday morning to wrap up some big deal he was working on. He drove down Sunday afternoon so he could get ready and not have to make the drive Monday morning. At least, that’s what he told me. I have a feeling there was something entirely different going on and he had a big date planned.”

“And where were you Sunday night?”

“At home.”

“Was anyone else with you?”

“No. My kids were at their grandmother’s, having a sleepover. I was enjoying some blissful me-time. I got dinner delivered, had a bottle of wine, a bubble bath, a good book, and I got to pick what to watch on TV.”

“About what time was your dinner delivered?”

“Six or so, I guess.”

I knew with a sinking feeling where he was going with this. She could easily have driven here from Dallas after six in time to run her cheating husband off the road. I could sympathize. I’d once been in a situation in which I’d been alone when a murder I’d been suspected of had happened. I tried to think of what might help her prove her innocence—assuming she was innocent. I had to admit that she made a good suspect, but my instincts said she wasn’t involved. “Were you watching a DVD or streaming?” I asked.

Wes shot me a “Lex, stay out of this” glare.

“I was streaming,” Lauren said, then her face brightened. “You should be able to check with the streaming company that I watched something from that IP address at that time. I’ve also got a doorbell camera, and you’d have seen my car go by if I’d left the house.”

“I’ll have to get the details from you,” Wes said. “I’d like you to come with me to the police department.”

Lauren groaned. “I should have known coming here was a bad idea.”

“We’d have made it to you eventually,” Wes said.

“What about Blake Larsen, Tiffani’s ex?” I blurted. “It’s interesting that he’s not at the funeral. Guilty conscience?”

“Blake Larsen has an alibi. Mrs. Grant doesn’t. And, as you pointed out to me, her name is on the company paperwork.”

Chapter Thirteen

Lauren looked at Wes with a degree of cool I couldn't help but envy. "Is that an accusation, officer?" she asked, her voice chilly.

"Merely an observation," he said, his tone perfectly neutral. "I need to get a statement from you for the investigation, and we may as well take care of it now, while you're here. You could come with me downtown to the police station."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not at this time."

"Then I will decline your offer. I'll get in touch with my lawyer and schedule an appointment some other time when I can have my lawyer present. Given that it's a Friday afternoon, I may not be able to get back to you on that until Monday."

I was impressed. When I'd been in a similar situation, I'd folded and was willing to answer whatever he asked me, just so I could get it over with and get out of town.

"Is there some reason you feel you need your lawyer present?" Wes asked.

"It's my right," she said with a shrug. "I have nothing to hide, but I would like legal counsel. I can call my lawyer now and see if he can set up an appointment."

While they wrangled over legal stuff, Tiffani drifted away to look at what was going on with what remained of the funeral service. It had pretty much dissolved after the bird attack, and now the minister was wrapping up the actual religious part of the

service for the family members in the pavilion. “Well, at least they got my parents in the same room,” Tiffani commented. “There aren’t any walls, but I think it still counts as a room.”

I gestured for Margarita to join me so I could talk to Tiffani without looking like I was speaking to thin air. “She doesn’t seem so bad,” Tiffani said with a glance toward Lauren once we’d joined her. “At least he didn’t try to tell me how awful his wife was. Then again, if he had, I wouldn’t have dated him because it meant he had a wife.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe I was so stupid. I guess I got what was coming to me for dating a married man. I think maybe I didn’t want to see any of the signs because I liked his money and flashy car. He was classier than the guys around here.”

“You didn’t deserve what happened,” I said. “And you didn’t know. He was lying to you. I think if anyone got what was coming, it was him, and you got caught in the crossfire. Is there anything else you can remember about that night? Did you see any cars or trucks you recognized on the road before the accident?”

“I wasn’t really looking because I was wondering if I should go through with sleeping with him.”

“Can you tell me what was going on that day, in general?”

“Well, I worked Sunday brunch. It must have been four or so before I got off. I came home and got all spiffed up because I had a big date. He picked me up about six, and we went to Waco for dinner, a nice one. We came back to town, and he said he wanted to show me what he’d been working on. He drove down the River Road, and he said he’d bought some land there and was going to make a fortune. That was when the truck came up behind us.” She frowned. “I remember thinking it was weird that all those people had sold their land because I know lots of them had been there for generations.”

“Had anyone been following you or showing up a lot before that happened?”

“Not that I noticed. Blake stopped stalking me years ago, when

he started seeing Emily. He still came to the restaurant with her. It was mostly date nights with his wife, but I think he also wanted to make sure I knew that he'd moved on and upgraded. Not that I cared. I left him because I didn't want to be with him, so it didn't matter to me who he was with. I wished them both well."

"Did he see you with Tyler?"

"He must have. He came in a few times after Tyler started coming to town, and I'm sure he noticed the way we talked to each other. But he never said anything."

"When did Tyler start coming in?"

"Late last year. During the fall, I think. I didn't notice him much at first until he became really regular, like coming in once a week or so, and it always looked very businesslike."

The funeral service ended, and the family began leaving. The cemetery staff would take care of actually putting the casket in the ground and covering it later. "What happens to me now?" Tiffani asked plaintively. "Does me being here mean I'm not going to heaven?"

"I don't know how it works," I said. "It seems to me that only some people stick around here, either because they want to or because they have something they need to resolve. Once they feel like they've had the closure they need, they move on, and I don't know what happens then."

"I want to know why I died," she said. "Maybe that's it. Am I stuck at the cemetery, or can I haunt other places? I have a list."

"I'm not sure about that, either. From what I can tell, ghosts are bound to where their bodies are, a place that was meaningful to them, or the place where they died. I don't know if they can move around among those places or if they get stuck at one of them. The ghosts I've talked to can come and go from this plane, but I don't know how that works."

She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. "I'm afraid to try because I might not be able to come back, and I need to know. I need justice."

“I’ll do everything I can to get you justice,” I promised her. “And I’ll come back to let you know what I’ve learned.”

“I appreciate that. Tell Margarita that her taking a chance on me meant everything. It saved my life, literally. I was out of hope, and she gave me a job that I probably didn’t deserve. It was the best thing that ever happened to me, and every good thing that happened after that was because of her.”

I passed that on, trying to keep the wording as accurate as I could. Margarita gulped, then said in a hoarse voice, “It was my pleasure. You were the best waitress I ever had, so I was the one who came out a winner. I’ll come back with Lexie to see you again.”

Lauren apparently had wrapped things up with her lawyer to Wes’s satisfaction because he’d left her alone to escort the family away from the cemetery. Lauren stood there, shaking her head, as Margarita and I rejoined her. “This is just too much to be believed,” she said. “My husband dies, I find out that he was seeing someone else and doing business in my name without telling me, and then I’m a suspect in his death, so I have to come back to this nowhere town with a lawyer to convince them I’m not a murderer.”

“Are you up to driving back now?” I asked. “Maybe you need to sit down a while somewhere cool and have some coffee or tea.”

She shook her head. “No, I’ve had enough self-indulgence for the day. My kids are also going through a lot, and they need me. I’d better get back home. I’ll stop on the way out of town and get a big soda for the drive. And I’ll be back next week for the formal police interview.” She frowned. “Why are you being so nice to me, anyway? Is this some kind of good cop, bad cop thing with the police department? Don’t you think I killed my husband and his mistress?”

“I think there’s something else going on. And I’ve been in a somewhat similar situation, so I can sympathize. When I first came to this town, I found the body of a murder victim, and without me

knowing it at the time, there were circumstances that gave me a possible motive. I was alone at the time of death, so finding an alibi was tough. So, I kind of know what you're going through."

"Well, thanks. I appreciate it. You're at the local newspaper?"

"Yes, downtown, not too far from the police station. You should drop by when you come back for that interview. Since you're an interior designer, you have to see my place. It was decorated in the twenties and hasn't been updated since then, so it's like an Art Deco time capsule."

"Original Art Deco? Yeah, I have to see that. I'm coming back on Wednesday, so I'll pop by, unless they lock me up." With a wave, she turned and made her way toward the road, tiptoeing gingerly on her high heels.

Margarita and I followed behind her, heading for my car. Wes caught up with us. "How are you holding up, Margarita?" he asked.

"I'm okay, I guess," she said. "The funeral was definitely an interesting send-off."

He turned to me. "Please tell me you're not getting caught up in all this. Did you call the wife in?"

"I had nothing to do with it. I just happened to notice her." I said. "I can appreciate the situation she's in, though I wasn't dealing with the death of someone I cared about or the news that he betrayed me. I don't think she did it, by the way. She doesn't seem like the white pickup truck type."

"White pickup truck?"

"That's what ran Tiffani and Tyler off the road. At least, according to Tiffani."

"You've talked to Tiffani?"

"She was here."

He winced. "Oh, no, she had to see that?"

"She wasn't amused. And then she was. It was all rather ridiculous, wasn't it?"

"One for the record books."

“Don’t worry, it’s not going in the paper. In Dallas, I might have, since a tiny fraction of the readership would have had any connection to the family. Here, it would be tacky.”

“What else did Tiffani have to say?”

“She didn’t know the guy was married. He boasted about buying up the property along the River Road. A white pickup truck came up behind them, fast. Tyler swerved out of the way, the truck swerved around them but clipped them, and that’s all she knew, other than she thought she saw writing on the side of the truck as it passed.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down much. Half the businesses in town have white pickup trucks with some kind of logo or sign on the side.”

“But I think it does rule out Lauren.”

“I’ll make that call.”

“Yeah, I guess ‘a ghost said it was a different kind of vehicle’ wouldn’t look good on a police report.”

“And the wife certainly has motive. I wouldn’t blame her for wanting to run him off the road.”

He walked us to my car and gave me a rather significant look as I got in the driver’s seat. I gave him a “what?” look in response, and he just sighed and closed the door for me.

Once I was inching along in the line of cars trying to get on Main Street, Margarita said, “He knows? About you and ghosts?”

“Yeah, thanks to his grandmother.”

“And you know about him, his mind reading thing?”

“Yeah. Oddly enough, apparently he has a hard time reading me.”

“He said the same thing to me. He says I have some pretty solid mental barriers.”

“You don’t think that’s a line to make people more comfortable around him, do you?” I asked, suddenly worried.

“I don’t know. We ought to test him sometime.” She leaned back in her seat, took a deep breath, and released it slowly. “Who

do you think killed them? It does sound like it was on purpose, like they wanted to at least scare them even if they weren't trying to kill them."

"I think it has something to do with that real estate scam. I really believe Ryan Dobert is involved, but no one can imagine anything bad about him, for some odd reason. The guy gives me major creep vibes, but he seems to have a kind of charisma that makes people trust him, even go to bat for him. None of the people he's ripped off seem at all angry, other than one ghost. They don't realize yet that they've been ripped off. So, if Tyler and Tiffani were killed because of the real estate stuff, then it seems like it would have to be Ryan getting his partner out of the way. Unless it's my original theory that the angry ghost was involved. Maybe it spooked the other driver so they didn't realize they were coming up behind Tyler until it was too late."

"Can ghosts do that?"

"I don't know. I'm still learning about all this. I didn't realize until I came here that I've been seeing ghosts all my life. Even Jean doesn't know all the rules. But then I think she's pretty much made up her own rules."

"You're sure those people were ripped off? Maybe they felt like they got a fair deal."

"I suspect they didn't get market value for their land, but the real problem is going to show up later. Unless Ryan's able to sell that whole tract of land pretty quickly, he doesn't have the money to pay them. They sold one plot, which gave them enough money to make down payments on the other deals, but he doesn't have the money to make any other payments, and they didn't go through a bank to get a mortgage, so they must have been making payments to the owners themselves." I banged the steering wheel in frustration. "And that kills Ryan's motive. There's going to be a mess, since the partnership involved Lauren's company, and you can bet she's not going to play along. He might not be able to get whatever assets they had."

“He might not have thought that far ahead. People do stupid things when they’re angry.”

“Yeah, maybe. But if he was thinking at all clearly, the time to kill the partner would be *after* they sold the combined tracts to a real developer.”

When we reached downtown, I said, “Want me to drop you off at your place, or do you want to stop by mine for a cup of tea, or something?”

“No, I need to get to work. Fridays are always busy. But let’s just park at your place, and then you can come to work with me and keep me company. I’ll make a pitcher.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I parked in my garage, and we walked the block to her restaurant, which was still relatively quiet. Only a couple of older people were there, having an early dinner. From the way they looked at me when we entered, you’d have thought I was on the Most Wanted poster in the post office as a notorious kitten killer.

“I see what you mean,” Margarita whispered when we reached the bar. “They really don’t like you.”

“It’s spreading. I don’t know if these are some of the victims who’ve been manipulated into thinking I’m the real villain or if they’re friends of victims who’ve raised the alarm about me.”

She went into the kitchen to check on preparations for the dinner rush and returned with a pitcher of margaritas and a basket of chips with a cup of chili con queso on the side. “We need a little protein to soak up the tequila,” she said.

“Oh, most definitely,” I said, dipping a chip in the melted cheese while she poured our drinks. When she handed me a glass, I raised it and said, “To Tiffani.”

“To Tiffani,” she echoed, clinking her glass against mine before we both drank. The cold, tart drink felt good going down. “She really was the best waitress, and the others would probably agree with me. She had this way of making you feel like you were a welcome visitor in her own home.”

“That’s what Grace said at the Old Mill.”

“And now she’s probably alone out at that cemetery.”

I couldn’t help but wince. “No, not really alone.”

“That may be worse. She’s surrounded by other ghosts while she’s still getting used to the idea.”

“From what I saw of her, she won’t have any trouble making friends.”

Margarita grinned. “You’re right about that.” She finished her drink, took a couple of deep breaths, and said, “Okay, time to get to work. I’ve got a business to run.”

While I glanced at the menu, trying to decide whether to try something new or stick with my usual favorites, I got an itchy feeling between my shoulder blades. I turned to find that not only were the original older couple I’d noticed on my way in staring at me, but they’d been joined by a few others. If they’d been descended from a fire starter from the sideshow, I’d be extra crispy about now. Fortunately, as far as I knew, there was no fire starter.

I ordered tacos because I figured they’d be quick, and then I could eat and get out of there and back home. As a journalist I’d had to develop a fairly thick skin, but I wasn’t used to having my work woes follow me into my personal life. I got ugly phone calls and e-mails at work, but I could go out to eat without worrying that I’d end the evening wearing tar and feathers. The really annoying thing was that I hadn’t actually done anything yet. I’d made a few phone calls and had gone on one interview that went nowhere. I hadn’t put a word in print.

But maybe I should. I had enough evidence that there was something suspicious going on to write a story. If I was going to be a pariah, at least let it be for a reason. Either they’d run me out of town completely or they’d see that Ryan was snowing them. As one of my journalism professors liked to say, don’t pick a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel.

Chapter Fourteen

Margarita must have noticed the hostility directed at me because she got my food out almost instantly and stayed near me, as though daring anyone to say anything. That reinforced my decision to take a stand. I had a friend backing me up, and I couldn't let her be dragged down for supporting me. None of the people I usually chatted with over dinner were there, so I got through my meal fairly quickly. I'd just paid and slid off my barstool to go when the front door opened and Ryan entered.

You'd have thought a celebrity had shown up from the way everyone reacted. Every head in the place turned toward him, and they all smiled. Even Margarita lit up at his entrance and came out from behind the bar to greet him. I was pretty sure he was doing something uncanny to create that reaction because I felt a stirring in my own heart that made me want to bask in his nearness, and I hated the guy. Since I knew what was going on, I was able to fight it off quickly. Margarita also snapped out of it and moved away with a glance toward me. She raised her eyebrows and hurried back to the bar.

Ryan's eyes met mine, and his genial mask slipped for a moment. Much to my surprise, he didn't look angry. He looked scared. He knew I could bring him down, and all his efforts to discredit me were the desperate, last-gasp flailing of a man on the decline. That made me even more eager to keep him from ever being able to con anyone in this town again, whether it was with

nutritional supplements or real estate.

Instead of glaring at him or treating him like the enemy he was, I gave him my biggest, friendliest smile. “Hey, Ryan!” I said. “How’s it going?”

He didn’t seem to know how to respond. He looked like he’d been braced for a fight, but I’d disarmed him. He couldn’t be nasty to me now in front of his followers, or it would totally ruin his narrative. The supposed villain had been nice and friendly, so he as the supposed hero couldn’t afford to be the one to be mean.

When he didn’t respond, I walked past him with a cheerful, “Have a good evening!”

I managed to maintain that casual attitude long enough to get outside before I began shaking with rage. Oh, he was gonna get it, I told myself. And it would feel good.

I noticed a pickup truck with an “El Rio Development” magnetic sign on the door parked in front of the restaurant, but the truck was, alas, maroon, not white, and there was no damage to the front bumper. I’d already reluctantly ruled him out in killing Tiffani and Tyler, but that sealed it. If he’d borrowed someone else’s truck to do the deed, that would be difficult to prove, and he could always claim it was an accident. No, I’d have to settle for blowing up his real estate scheme. Justice for Tiffani would have to come from another direction.

I let myself have the night off so I could make a fresh start with more energy the next day, and then I spent the weekend digging through the documents my friend had e-mailed. Just the fact that Lauren’s business had been used without her knowledge should be enough to show that there was a problem with El Rio. I’d need to get a more official statement from Lauren to back that up, and maybe she’d be willing to share some financial info, too.

I went back through the list of property purchases attributed to El Rio, looking for someone who might be willing to talk to me. I hadn’t called anyone associated with the Smiths because of the recent death in their family, but maybe that would make them

more willing to talk, if they thought that being scammed had brought about their loved ones' deaths, as the ghost had alleged. I started with the obituaries, but they'd had daughters, and they were only referred to by their first names, so I had no idea what their names might be now or what their children's names might be. The obituaries just said "four grandchildren."

I didn't find anyone in the directory under "Smith" with those names, so the daughters must have married. The marriages were long enough ago that I couldn't do an easy search of the newspaper's digital archives. It looked like I was stuck doing things the old-fashioned way.

I spent the better part of the weekend digging through old newspapers, looking for wedding announcements for the Smith daughters. I'd found one of them by Sunday night and called at what I hoped was a reasonable hour on Monday morning. "Hi, this is Lexie Lincoln with the *Gazette*," I said when someone answered that number.

I braced myself for the phone to go dead, but the woman on the line said, "Yes?"

"I understand your parents sold some property on the River Road recently."

She groaned. "Yeah, and it's been a real pain. We can't find the money they were supposed to have received for it, or the paperwork."

"I think I might know why," I said. "It's something I'm investigating, and if you'd be willing to talk about your experience, that could expose the scheme so we can help a lot more people."

"So, it really was shady?"

"It looks like it."

"That other newspaper editor called us about it right after my father died, but we didn't hear anything else from him, I guess because he was killed."

"He didn't leave any notes about his investigation, I'm afraid. I only just got a tip about what might be going on."

She agreed to set up an interview, and I couldn't resist doing a little happy dance around the office after I hung up. "What did you put in your tea this morning?" Charlene asked.

"Just a splash of milk," I said. "But someone talked to me on the phone without hanging up on me, and I think I'll be able to get a story!"

"You call that dancing?" Jean asked. "Back in my day, we knew how to cut a rug. It wasn't just standing there and shimmying. You had to know steps. You had to be able to communicate with your partner."

"This isn't that kind of dancing," I said, feeling self-conscious. "I'm just celebrating."

The interview was set for the next day, and in the meantime, I had to deal with the rest of the newspaper. That turned out to be the only call I made all day in which someone was willing to talk to me. I had to take over the clerical work while Charlene made the phone calls. It was all the more incentive to prove that Ryan Dobert was a scammer. That was the only way I'd be able to save my job.

Robbie Parker, née Smith, lived in one of the newer subdivisions on the edge of town, an area I hadn't explored much. The house was the sort of brick house that filled the newer Dallas suburbs, with a tiny front lawn and no front porch to speak of. It was a big contrast to the older homes near downtown. "Thank you so much for meeting with me," I said when she opened the door and asked me in.

"If you can shed any light on the situation, that'll be a huge help," she said. "We were surprised when Mom and Dad sold their land and moved into the nursing home. I'd have thought the only way we'd get Dad off that land was in a coffin. It seems he felt that way, too, because he got very agitated about having been cheated and said he didn't want to sell. We thought maybe it was dementia, and he died within weeks. Mom was the same way but, again, it came across like dementia. She kept insisting we take her home, to

the old house, which she said was still hers because they hadn't been paid for it. It turns out, she may have been right. There was one payment, not nearly enough for what it was worth. It sounds like it was supposed to be a self-financed mortgage, where the buyers would make regular payments to the sellers. When we tried to track down the buyer, it turns out they sold it to someone else. It's going to take lawyers to dig out from under all this."

I explained what I knew of the scheme so far, and she groaned at Ryan's name. "My sister got in with him on that vitamin racket. I don't think she sold a thing other than to herself, but she wasn't too unhappy because it meant she got the vitamins at a discount and got to count her own sales on her record."

"He has a history of this sort of thing?"

"He could sell ice at the North Pole, but he has a talent for screwing it up—like he'd sell the ice and probably could have sold more to the same customers, but then he'd never get around to delivering it, so he'd have to charm his customers into not being mad, and then he'd get into another business. Those same people would buy the next thing he decided to sell. It's crazy that he gets away with it, but you can't get anyone to say a harsh word about him."

"It doesn't sound like you have that problem."

"The charm wears off when it costs you your parents and your family land. My sister's even angrier. She was the one who would have inherited that place, and she was going to give it to her kids. They already had plans for the land. Her daughter was going to remodel the family home, and her son was going to build a new home and a business on the stretch that fronts the state highway. And then my parents sold it out from under them."

"Do you think your sister's son and daughter would be willing to talk to me?" I asked.

She frowned. "I don't know. I'd better check with them before I give out their numbers. I'll have them call you."

I made sure I had permission to quote her before I left, given

the way things had been going for me. If people accused me of harassment after I called them once, I could only imagine the outrage if I quoted someone without permission.

Instead of going straight back to the office, I drove back to the River Road to get a look at the property in question. The Smith place was pretty valuable land, on the corner of the River Road and the business spur of the state highway that became Main Street. It was still rural, but it got a fair amount of traffic. There was no wonder why that had been the scammers' first target or why they'd been able to sell it. But if they didn't have the deed because they had a mortgage with the Smiths, it made me wonder how they'd sold it. Was the developer they'd sold it to equally shady, or had there been forged paperwork? Surely any legitimate firm would have made sure there was a clear title before paying cash for land. There was already a "for sale" sign on the property, so whoever it was seemed to be trying to unload it.

I went back to the office and tried to dig up information on that company, but I kept running into dead ends. It was even more elusive than El Rio. That end of the scheme was secondary, though, aside from the fact that it demonstrated poor judgment on Ryan's part that he'd sold to someone like that. I had plenty of material for a story to at least make people question Ryan's actions.

I got even more material at lunchtime on Wednesday when Lauren Grant dropped by the office with a box under her arm. "How did the police interview go?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "I still don't have a solid alibi, but I think my lawyer scared your cop friend. By the time we were through talking, he seemed convinced that I wasn't a viable suspect."

I couldn't tell her why that probably was, so I said, "Wes has good instincts. If you didn't do it, he'll know." That was exactly what people had told me when I was a suspect.

"I brought you some things—copies of all the paperwork I could find about my husband's dealings. My lawyer says there's going to be a real mess. The deals were done through a partnership

involving my business, without my knowledge, so none of the deals are likely to be legal, but there's a lot to untangle. I've also given copies to the police, since this looks like fraud."

I had to admit, the very thought gave me a tingle of pleasure. I couldn't expect an arrest right away because they'd have to get through the paper trail and find evidence of an actual crime, but it gave me a bit more to go on. "Would you mind doing an interview for the paper?" I said. "I'd like to get you on record saying you weren't involved and these people were lied to."

"I'd love to," she said with relish. "And, as I recall, you mentioned Art Deco?"

With perfect timing, Charlene came back from lunch, and I introduced her to Lauren, adding, "I'm taking her upstairs for an interview."

When we got upstairs, Jean was already there, which made me nervous. What would she do if Lauren criticized her decor?

"Wow, this is amazing," Lauren said. "And in pretty good shape, too."

"I think I'm only the third person to live here in nearly a hundred years," I said. "Of course, the flat-screen TV probably ruins the effect. Along with the Ikea bookcases."

"No, this isn't a museum. It's a home. In fact, you should probably add a few more personal touches. You don't need everything to be from the same period. I wouldn't go with something like heavy or ornate Victorian items, but you could put something more modern in here without ruining the effect. Mid-century modern might work well mixed in."

"Maybe," Jean hedged. "But I like it the way it is."

Fortunately, Lauren couldn't hear her, so I ignored her while I gave Lauren a brief tour of the place. Then we sat down in the living room for the interview. She said the money to pay for the Smiths' land had come out of her husband's retirement account. "Fortunately, I have my own money, since I doubt I'll see that again," she said. From there, it had been a financial shell game,

with the result being that no one had been paid more than a down payment, and all the sales and loans had been little more than handshake agreements, with simple one-page contracts that looked like they were nothing more than paperwork to make the transaction feel official. “He had these contracts in a file in his home office, and even I can tell they’re not worth the paper they’re printed on. I find it really hard to believe anyone would have gone along with that.”

“His local contact is something of a golden boy around here,” I explained. “These people had known him his whole life, and these are the kind of people who are proud to do business on a handshake. They seem to think there’s something special about small towns, like things are really different here, and you don’t need to lock your door or use lawyers when you’re doing business. Though I’m not sure what they thought they were going to be able to do with the land without clear titles.”

“I think his plan was to present the whole tract to the company he worked for, like he was bringing them a windfall, and then let the company do the more formal sales agreements. Maybe he thought that if he was the one assigned to the project, he’d be able to straighten it all out before the company realized that the initial agreements had been worthless. He got passed over for a promotion last year, and I think he was trying to prove himself. His personality changed around that time, now that I think about it. He was obsessed with moving up and being some kind of big shot wheeler and dealer. He bought the midlife crisis mobile, started coloring his hair, the works. I should have seen the red flags, but I figured it was just a guy thing and gave him space.”

I was scribbling so fast that my hand was cramping. I was also recording the interview on a digital recorder, since I imagined I’d want backup. It didn’t help my focus that Jean kept excitedly interjecting things like, “Oh, this is dynamite! Huge story! This is going to cause an earthquake in this town.”

“Do you know where Ryan Dobert came in on this?” I asked.

“They were friends in college. I don’t know whose idea all this was, whether Tyler was looking for an opportunity and thought of Ryan or if Ryan had a business idea and needed someone to help him pull it off. But I don’t find his name in the paperwork, just this Miranda Dobert.”

“I understand that’s his mother. He hid an earlier business venture behind her. She’s even more well-liked than he is, so no one would dare go after her, even if they felt cheated.”

She hesitated, then asked, “Do you think this has something to do with why Tyler was killed?”

“I’m still not sure,” I said. “I’ve only run into one family that’s upset about these deals. No one else is willing to listen to a bad thing about Ryan. They’re still sure the whole thing was on the up-and-up. It may have just been an accident, a drunk driver running them off the road and then fleeing so he wouldn’t be caught.”

“I’m mad at him, and I probably always will be, but I would like him to get justice if someone really did kill him on purpose. But that’s probably not likely, huh? There’s not a lot to go on, based on what the cops told me.”

“That does seem to be the case, I’m afraid,” I said. “But maybe when all this comes out, that’ll shake something else loose.”

“At least it looks like those people will get their land back, and that’s something.”

It was something, but it wasn’t enough. I had what might be the story of the year, and yet it still didn’t incriminate Ryan.

Chapter Fifteen

I spent the rest of the day writing my story, with a lot of input from Jean reading over my shoulder. She usually left me alone when I was writing and only put her two cents in during the editing process, but she was as excited about being on the trail of big news as I was, so I didn't try to stop her. Not that she would have listened, and I didn't know how to get rid of a ghost. Even if I knew, I figured trying to banish my boss would be a career-limiting move.

It was a good story. There was a nice mix of human interest and hard facts, and I had thorough documentation that proved something suspicious was going on. It would probably lead to the victims getting their property back, and if they still wanted to sell it, they'd be able to make legitimate sales that would pay them what they deserved. That was a victory in anyone's book.

It just wasn't what I wanted it to be. I'd been hoping for something that would make it absolutely clear that Ryan Dobert was a crook who'd taken advantage of elderly people who trusted him, and therefore nothing he said about me could be believed. Unfortunately, he'd covered his tracks pretty well, legally. There didn't seem to be anything in writing that tied him to the deals. Even the person who'd been willing to talk to me hadn't been directly involved in the deal, so she couldn't testify to the extent of his involvement. My only hope was that the people who'd been scammed would see the story and realize they'd been cheated, and

because of their interactions with Ryan, they'd know he was responsible. Then they could testify about Ryan's involvement, and that might start legal action against him, as well as give me a follow-up story if people were willing to be interviewed.

But would their outrage be enough to overcome his supernatural charisma? If no one turned on him, he was likely to get away scot-free. He might not get wealthy on the deal, but he wouldn't face any real consequences. That seemed to be what had always happened before. He didn't come out ahead and other people got hurt, but no one complained about him, so he was free to move on to his next scam. I desperately wanted to stop him entirely.

I wasn't even sure community outrage would be enough to stop him. What would he be able to do to a judge or jury? Could he smile at them and get them to disregard all the evidence and testimony? The first step, I reminded myself, was to get him linked to the scam. I could worry about the rest later.

I didn't expect it to go anywhere, but I made an obligatory call for comment to Miranda Dobert. With any luck, she'd be as angry as Lauren had been about having her name used in questionable business dealings without her knowledge. I got as far as, "This is Lexie Lincoln," before she hung up. I didn't know if she even knew her name had been used, or if she cared, and I doubted I'd be able to talk to her enough to find out. Maybe that would change after the story came out. With a sigh, I typed, "Miranda Dobert, the officer of the other company involved in the venture, declined to comment."

Fifteen minutes later, Wes called me. "I had another harassment complaint about you. You're going after Ryan's mother now?"

"Again, one phone call is not harassment. And her name's on the paperwork. I had an obligation to give her the opportunity to comment. I'd have been in the wrong if I'd run the story without giving her the chance. Now I can say I at least tried. Speaking of comments, I understand Lauren gave you quite the paper trail, and

it looks like there was some distinctly illegal stuff going on. Are you going to pursue an investigation? What actions is the police department taking?”

“This thing is above my pay grade. It’s been moved beyond me.”

“The chief’s investigating?” That was a surprise. The current police chief was more or less biding his time until retirement, with occasional bursts of activity to take credit for anything that happened while Wes did his job for him.

“Nope. It’s been kicked up to the county and state level. The feds may even get involved if there was bank fraud. Our department doesn’t have the expertise for the kind of forensic accounting this will require. They’re going to need ninja CPAs with law degrees and expertise in real estate.”

“So, that’s the police department’s official statement, that the investigation has been taken over by the county and state authorities?”

“Yeah, you can say that. Attribute it to a department spokesman. That way we can at least pretend that the chief was in the loop, even though he really has no clue. I brought him in to talk to Lauren, and he made the call to the county DA, but I don’t think he truly grasped what we’re dealing with.”

“Okay, department spokesman it is,” I said, typing that into my story.

“Now for a bit off the record.” His voice dropped, becoming low and almost intimate. This was him in personal mode, not professional. “Lex, play this one very carefully. There’s a lot at stake, and you can’t afford to make enemies.”

“I’ve already made enemies. He’s poisoned half the town against me. Charlene’s having to make all the phone calls because everyone hangs up on me. I can barely walk into a restaurant without getting death glares. I wouldn’t be surprised if people started turning me away. My only chance is exposing what he did. I can’t afford to let him get away with it if I want to stay in town.

The only way they'll get anything on him is if the people he's cheated realize it and turn on him. Then they may stop hating me."

"Don't hold your breath. I've seen this sort of thing happen before, though on a much smaller scale, and nothing ever comes of it. Loyalty runs deep around here, and people stand behind their own."

"Well, then I guess it's good that I still haven't finished unpacking."

"I'm not saying I agree. I'm just telling you not to get your hopes up. This time, it's a felony, so maybe it'll go further, but he does have a way of keeping people from getting mad at him."

I couldn't let him discourage me. I was sure that this time would be different. The people Dobert scammed were local, too, so the town wouldn't be siding with outsiders against one of their own. It would be local against locals. This was land that had been in families for generations, not people losing a few hundred dollars buying in to a vitamin business with no potential customers. Surely people wouldn't side with a smooth talker against little old ladies he'd cheated out of their heritage.

I called the county district attorney's office and got the expected "can't comment on an ongoing investigation" statement, which I dutifully put in the article. They wouldn't even confirm that any state agencies were involved.

"Weasels," Jean remarked. "Everyone's so afraid of lawyers these days—even the lawyers."

"Yeah, well, getting sued is no fun. It looks like I've dotted all my *is* and crossed all my *ts*. I don't think I'll be able to learn anything more before we go to press. What do you think?"

"You can always do a follow-up story, which will give you something good for later issues. You'll get back all those subscribers you lost. But I think you could stand to punch it up a bit more." She leaned over and began dictating edits.

When both Jean and I were satisfied with the article, I called Evelyn. Since she was president of the newspaper board, I felt like I

should alert her to something potentially explosive, and I thought it would be a good idea to run the article by the newspaper's lawyer. "Are you sure about this?" she asked after I explained the story.

"Everything in the article is backed up by documentation that the police also have."

"Well, then, let's go with it, but you're right, I want the lawyer to look at it." We set an appointment for the next morning, which would give me a chance to make any changes he required before we went to press.

The lawyer didn't make me feel any better about the story. He made me remove Ryan's name entirely, since I had no records mentioning him and no firsthand comment about his involvement in the land deals. Grace's statement about him being present at lunches wasn't good enough, since she didn't know what those lunches were about and couldn't say exactly who else was at the lunches. The best I could do was include Miranda's name, since it was in the paperwork, and let her refusal to comment speak for itself.

It was truly discouraging, since I had to hope people involved would know his role and realize he'd scammed them, and then I had to hope that Miranda's involvement would clue in the rest of the town until possibly the victims started talking and word spread. That was a lot of hoping.

Still, considering that the week before I'd worried we'd have to put a wedding on the front page, we were lucky to have had two big issues in a row, with the previous week's photo of a car being pulled out of the river and this week's real estate scam news. I was rather proud of the splashy "Elders Targeted in Real Estate Scheme" headline.

I tried not to think about the fact that the story might turn people even more against me. There was a distinct chance that it would end up ruining my ability to function as editor, and I'd have to leave for the good of the newspaper. Jean could talk about it

blowing over, but she'd grown up in the town and her father had been one of the wealthiest and most influential citizens. She could afford to rouse anger because most people in town couldn't afford to alienate her. I didn't have that luxury. I was a newcomer with no local ties and no money or influence. The town's citizens hadn't yet made up their minds about me, so for some, this whole thing was a very bad early impression.

Normally, I left home and went out to dinner while the press was running, but I didn't want to face the angry stares at any of the restaurants I usually patronized. Instead, I sat around the office until the first round of copies came off the press, took one, and headed out to the cemetery to see Tiffani.

In all the excitement about breaking the story of the real estate scandal, I hadn't done anything toward figuring out who'd killed her. I hoped it would be some consolation that her death had been what tipped me off to the fact that something shady was going on, and because of that some people wouldn't lose their family land.

The sun was just starting to set when I arrived at the cemetery, which meant it was prime time for ghosts to come out. I'd sat in this cemetery at night, and I didn't relish repeating the experience. It was truly creepy seeing all that swirling mist with hints of faces in it. I felt I owed it to Tiffani, though, so I steeled myself to get out of the car.

She was sitting alone under the tree where we'd watched her funeral service, staring at the mound of bare dirt now covering her grave. "Hi, Tiffani," I said as I approached.

She looked up at me, a smile spreading over her face. I thought her outline looked a bit blurrier than it had during the funeral. She seemed to be fading. "Any news?" she asked.

"Not about who killed you. I'm sorry." I spread my plastic mat on the ground so I could sit beside her. "I'm afraid I got sidetracked by something else that came up when I started looking into the accident." Now that I thought about it, I'd been entirely selfish. I wanted to save my own reputation, and that had led me

down a different path, no matter how much I said I wanted to get justice for Tiffani, either for Tiffani herself or because Margarita had been her friend. "I'm not even sure I succeeded there," I admitted, angrily wiping away a tear. I wasn't a big crier, especially not in front of other people. Maybe that was another sign Wes was right about me being bad at being a friend. I was afraid to show vulnerability, which meant I didn't trust people enough to get close enough to really be friends.

"Hey, honey, it's okay," Tiffani said. "It's not your fault. It's not even really your job, is it? You're a reporter, not the police. And even if you found out who killed me, I'm still dead. I'm curious, but knowing won't change much, other than me knowing who I should be haunting. If I can haunt. I haven't figured that part out yet."

I couldn't help but smile and chuckle a little. "But I wanted to find out. You deserve to know, and I want to do it for Margarita, to be a good friend to her."

"I've known Margarita for a long time, and I don't think you have to be a super detective to be her friend. You came with her to a funeral at a cemetery, where you probably knew you were going to see ghosts. That sounds like a friend to me. Have you known her long?"

I shook my head and wiped tears off my face with the back of my hand. "Just a few months."

"Really? Then you are a good friend. I'd have to know someone for years before I'd go to a funeral for them. And you came out here to talk to me, when you didn't even know me. That means a lot. Now, what was it that came up to sidetrack you?"

"Based on some things I learned because of your accident, I uncovered a big scandal, and that may end up helping a lot of people." I told her about the angry ghost at the accident scene, then showed her the newspaper. I had to hold the paper and a flashlight so she could read it, but she pored over it intently.

When she finished reading, she looked up at me. "That's what

Tyler was up to? What a creep! I can't believe I fell for that." She gave a derisive snort of bitter laughter. "Here I thought I was being so discerning, making sure I didn't fall into old, bad habits, and the first guy I decide to date after my divorce turns out to be a married con artist."

"I don't think that counts as falling into old, bad habits," I said. "Even the most careful among us can be deceived by people who are really good at deception. From the sounds of things, you went for someone who seemed to be the polar opposite of your ex, so you didn't make the same mistake twice."

"I just made a different mistake. Instead of a macho redneck who wanted to hold me back to make himself look better, I got a slick smooth-talker who was lying to me and everyone around him. And that got me killed. At least the macho redneck only bossed me around. He didn't get me killed."

"Tyler didn't intend to get you killed," I pointed out. "That person who ran you off the road may have had nothing to do with what he was up to. It could have been garden-variety reckless or drunk driving."

"Yeah, there are a lot of jerks around here who think they own the road and that they can intimidate everyone else with their big trucks, like they have the right-of-way because their truck outweighs your car, and they can't stand driving behind someone else. It would really suck, though, if that was it. You kind of want your death to mean something, you know?"

"It sucks no matter what. But, yeah, a stupid accident seems awfully pointless."

"You know what's really ironic about all this? My ex was one of the people who got ripped off. Well, indirectly. His new wife was going to inherit some of that land. Boy, did he let me know about it. He was going to get a house and land on River Road one day when his wife's grandparents died. Her parents didn't want the land and were going to let it go directly to the kids. I guess in a way the new guy got the ultimate revenge on my ex."

Chapter Sixteen

The “big story!” tingle went up my spine and down my arms to my fingertips. I felt like I was on the verge of a huge breakthrough. “Your ex had a stake in this?” I asked, my voice shaking. “Do you know the grandparents’ names?”

“They’re the Smiths, the ones on the corner. They had the big property. Emily’s brother was going to get the corner, facing the state highway, and Emily was going to get the house, right across from where we went off the road.” She shrugged one shoulder. “I guess that’s ironic, too.”

It was a warm night, but I shivered. “Emily’s grandmother was the ghost who tipped me off. She was furious about losing her land, and she blamed that for her husband’s death.” Maybe the accident and the scam were related, after all. I knew the ex was an early suspect and Wes had ruled him out, but I didn’t think Wes knew about this connection.

“Running someone off the road is definitely Blake’s style,” Tiffani said, shaking her head. “He’s got a bad temper, and I could see him getting mad about the guy who cost him the land dating his ex and riding his bumper to scare him. I don’t think he’d have tried to kill us, but he’s enough of an idiot that he might have misjudged distances and not realized what would happen if the driver whose bumper he was riding swerved out of the way. But like I told you before, his truck is black. He could have borrowed one, though.”

“Wes said he had an alibi.”

“If it’s his wife, she’s probably lying to cover for him. I know he wouldn’t have been at work because the auto parts store closes at five on Sundays.”

“Wes didn’t say. He probably checked cell phone records, though, and that would show where Blake was around that time.”

She snorted. “Blake would leave his own head behind if it wasn’t attached to his body. He was always forgetting things like his phone or his wallet. Wherever his phone was, it had probably been there for a week. That doesn’t mean anything.”

That was pretty much what they’d told me when I’d tried to use my phone’s location as an alibi—it only proved where my phone was, not where I was. Could it really have been the most obvious person who’d been ruled out first, but for a different reason than anyone suspected? Part of me wanted to call Wes right away, but I felt like I’d need more than the word of a ghost to convince him about someone he’d already ruled out. I didn’t think criticizing his investigative process would win me any points with him. Instead, I chatted some more with Tiffani before I headed back to the office to do some research.

I’d reached the edge of the main part of town when bright lights in my rearview mirror caught my attention. I glanced up to see headlights approaching me rapidly from behind. A surge of fear rushed over me, and I gripped the steering wheel. Was this the killer, doing the same thing all over again? I wasn’t near the river and I wasn’t driving very quickly, so a bump from behind probably wouldn’t be quite as bad as it had been for Tyler and Tiffani, but I definitely got a sense of what they might have experienced that night.

The lights came close enough that I was considering turning in to the next driveway to get out of the way when the vehicle suddenly whipped around me to pass on the left. My relief was quickly replaced by more fear when I saw that it was a white truck, and I was fairly certain that Blake Larsen was driving it. I

was also pretty sure there was writing on the door, but the truck had passed me and sped on through town before I got a good look.

It took a few minutes for my heart rate to return to normal after the moment of panic, and without all the adrenaline rushing through my system, I was then able to think more rationally. Maybe it was the same truck that had hit Tiffani and Tyler. The style of driving was certainly similar to what she'd described. But I'd probably filled in the image of Blake as the driver based on what I'd expected to see. There was no way I saw him clearly when he passed so quickly in the dark, and I didn't even know what Blake looked like now. I'd seen pictures in his high school yearbook, but I hadn't seen a recent photo. Obviously, I'd mentally pasted one of those yearbook photos onto the driver who'd passed me.

But that didn't mean he wasn't still a suspect.

I parked in front of the office instead of in the garage in back because I hated walking through the empty press room in the dark. I never could find the light switches near the rear door. Maybe we needed motion-activated lights in there for security purposes. I made a mental note to ask Evelyn about that as I put on the electric kettle. Of course, that assumed I still had a job and didn't get run out of town by Ryan Dobert's smear campaign.

Once I had a cup of tea to steady me after that scare, I sat down to do some research. Fortunately, Blake and Emily's wedding was recent enough to be in the digital archive. Eddie Jones, brother of the bride, was the best man. I knew Eddie was Robbie's nephew because she'd had him call me for the article. He hadn't had much to say, other than that he was mad about being cheated out of the land. I mentally scolded myself for not having done a search on him, or I'd have already known the connection to Blake.

I did a search on him now. The only other mention of him in the archives was as the owner of an auto service garage. He'd opened the business about ten years earlier and had joined the Civic League then. I didn't recall meeting him at any of the

meetings I'd been to, but then there probably wasn't a lot of networking benefit for a mechanic at a meeting like that, as long as his business was listed as a member in their directory. I couldn't find a picture of his tow truck to see if it was white. Surely Tiffani would have noticed if the truck that hit them had been a tow truck. Armed with enough facts that I thought I could pursue an investigation, I went to bed. I had a big day ahead of me.

I woke the next morning feeling like a kid at Christmas, only instead of being eager to see what was under the tree for me, I couldn't wait to find out how people were responding to my story. The newspaper was delivered by mail in the rural areas, but it was thrown on doorsteps in town, so the early risers would have already seen it. The way this town's grapevine worked, the word would have spread by now. Those who read the paper would have called other people, who would have passed it on. If the news spread the way I hoped, we might have to do another print run to replenish the stock in our sales boxes and at points of sale like gas stations and convenience stores.

I thought this would be a good morning to go to the diner for breakfast so I could get a read on how people were taking the news. That would be the fastest way to see how the wind was blowing. Would I still be a pariah, or would I be vindicated? I had to admit that there was a part of me wondering if I might even be a hero. I quickly suppressed the mental image of the diner exploding into spontaneous applause when I entered. I reminded myself that there was a good chance people would hate me even more for attacking the town's favorite son. That was what Wes had warned. This wasn't Ryan's first scam. Still, I wanted to know how people felt, and this was probably the quickest way to find out.

I was just coming out of the newsroom front door and turning to lock it when Wes pulled up in front of the newspaper office and stepped out of the police SUV. "Wow, you really blew things up, didn't you?" he said.

"I take it you've seen the newspaper."

“Yeah, and I’ve heard from a number of concerned citizens who are wondering when I’m going to make an arrest.”

“Every word in that story was vetted by the paper’s lawyer, and I stand behind it one hundred percent. Let me guess, people are calling to complain that I’m harassing them, or libeling their favorite local boy, or something.”

“No, they’re calling to file complaints against Ryan Dobert.”

It was what I’d hoped for, but I could hardly believe it. I had to grab the door frame to steady myself, I was so shocked. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

I couldn’t resist throwing my arms around him in a big hug of celebration. Realizing how inappropriate that was, I immediately released him and took a step back. “Then it worked. I was hoping that would happen.”

“Told you so,” Jean said, stepping through the front window. I didn’t know how far her boundaries extended, but it looked like she was good as long as she was close to the building. “Truth will prevail. It has power.”

“That was some good reporting,” Wes said. He paused, got very interested in the sidewalk, then said without looking up, “And I was way out of line with my criticism about the way you approach things. You got this story because you were being a good friend. You were kind to Lauren not because you wanted anything out of her, but because you’re a nice person and you knew she was going through something terrible. And you were there to meet her because you were supporting Margarita. You stayed on top of the story even though people kept getting in your way because you wanted justice.”

“I wanted to take down Ryan for slandering me,” I admitted. “But you were right. I needed that wake-up call. Things started happening for me once I remembered what my priorities should be. That’s a key thing to keep in mind in a town like this, where I have to be a part of the community I’m reporting on.”

“Still, it wasn’t my place to say anything. It’s not like I’m an

expert on friendship.”

“I imagine it’s tough for you to get close to people, since you know what they really think.”

“Yeah.”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, made even more uncomfortable by the fact that I knew Jean was eavesdropping, and to break it I said, “Did you know that Tiffani’s ex’s new wife was related to the Smiths? She was supposed to inherit part of the land they sold.”

He frowned. “No, I wasn’t aware of that connection.”

“Tiffani told me. Apparently, Blake liked to brag that he was going to inherit that riverfront property someday so she’d be sure to know he upgraded in the wife department. I looked it up, and the new wife is the granddaughter of the Smiths. Her aunt said she and her brother were supposed to have inherited it.”

“You’ve been visiting Tiff?”

“I went to give her an update last night so she’d know what her boyfriend had been up to. She thought it was funny that her boyfriend cost her ex the land he’d been counting on. It sounds like he’d have had multiple motives to kill them, but I guess he has an alibi and he doesn’t drive a white pickup.”

He was already moving toward his SUV. “But his brother-in-law does, and you just said he was also supposed to inherit.”

I ran after him, but when I caught up with him he said, “Nope. You can’t ride along with me on official business.”

“Then I’ll drive myself. Just tell me where to go.” I knew what the brother-in-law’s business was, but I didn’t remember the exact address, and I still didn’t know the town well enough to find an address without looking it up on a map.

He gave me a grin. “If you can find it yourself, you’re welcome to show up on your own.”

“Oh, come on, I gave you the tip, and you’re not going to let me be there for the takedown?”

“I’m not going to let you be there for an interview to determine

his whereabouts for the night in question.” With a mocking salute, he got in his SUV and drove off.

I resisted the urge to shout after him what was going through my mind because that kind of behavior on Main Street was beneath the dignity of a newspaper editor and might reflect poorly on me.

“You’re going to just let him go and break the case?” Jean asked.

“Working on it,” I said, getting my phone out of my purse. I’d look up the brother-in-law’s home address and maybe see if I could find his business, and then decide which one Wes had gone to.

And who was I kidding? Anything worth reporting on would be over by the time I got there.

Unless maybe his suspect was gone before Wes reached him.

I looked up the auto shop business and found the number for their roadside assistance service. I called it. “Yeah, this is Eddie,” was the answer.

Trying to sound like a helpless southern belle, I said, “Hi, my car isn’t starting. I think maybe I left my lights on last night. Can you do jump starts?”

“Sure can. Where are you?”

I gave him the street address for the newspaper, and he said, “Yeah, I can be there in about five.”

“Thank you so much,” I said, and I hoped he left before Wes got to him. “He’s coming to me,” I told Jean after I ended the call, though I kept the phone up so no one would think I was talking to myself. Cell phones made it easy to cover a conversation with a ghost.

I knew it was risky to draw my suspect to me, but it was broad daylight on Main Street in the middle of downtown, so surely he wouldn’t do anything to me. I just wanted to see what his truck looked like and check to see if there were any signs on his bumper of hitting anything—or of recent repairs.

Or was this a waste of time? I knew Blake supposedly had an

alibi, but Eddie being the killer didn't make any sense. Yeah, Tyler had cheated him out of his family land, but so had Ryan. If it was just about the land, wouldn't Ryan have been the more obvious target, or possibly an additional target, as someone the family had known who'd betrayed them? The kind of macho posturing raging it would have taken to ride someone's bumper and drive them off the road was personal, the way a man might feel about another man who not only had ripped him off, but who also was dating his ex-wife—or the way he'd feel about a wife who'd left him and then hooked up with a guy who'd taken the land he saw as his. Blake Larsen had to be the killer, so Wes was barking up the wrong tree.

I stood there in front of the newspaper office, torn about what to do. Would Wes believe me if I called him? It wasn't as though I had any evidence. It was just a gut thing.

"What's the deal, kiddo?" Jean asked. "You look like you just had a revelation."

"I think I know who killed Tiffani—her ex."

"Didn't he have an alibi?"

"Maybe it was a lie, someone covering for him. And Tiffani said he was always forgetting his phone. But I can't prove anything. I just know it, which I can't put in the newspaper, and it definitely won't hold up in court."

I heard the rumble of an engine approaching and looked up to see a white pickup truck coming down Main Street. As it drew near, I noticed that there was writing on the side: "Eddie Jones Auto Repair: Roadside Assistance," with a phone number beneath it. It turned and parked next to my car, and a man got out.

He looked vaguely familiar, like someone I'd met once or maybe had seen an old picture of. It took me a moment to connect him to what I'd seen in the high school yearbook. He hadn't changed all that much. He even had the same hairstyle.

If I wasn't mistaken, this was Blake Larsen. Driving a white truck.

He had to be the killer, and I'd brought him to me.

Chapter Seventeen

“**L**ooks like my luck is holding out,” I said softly to Jean as

Blake shut his truck’s door. “That’s Blake.”

“Don’t go confronting someone you think is capable of murder,” she warned.

“I don’t plan to confront him. I just want a look at the bumper on that truck.”

Blake approached. “Did someone call for a jump start?” He was a lot taller than he’d looked in the yearbook photos, towering over me, and he’d stayed in good shape. That made him rather imposing, especially given what I knew about him from Tiffani.

I figured that someone having car trouble would be a bit agitated, so I didn’t try to tamp down my nerves too much. “Yeah, I don’t know what’s going on, but it wouldn’t start. I hope I don’t need anything more than a jump.”

“You got the keys?” he asked, holding a hand out.

“Oh yeah, sure.” While I dug around in my purse, it occurred to me that he’d know as soon as he tried to start the car that I’d lied—and he would have my keys. I found the spare key I kept for valets and mechanics instead of using my whole key ring and handed it to him.

While he went to try to start my car, I stepped forward to get a better look at his bumper. It was reinforced steel and could probably ram into another car and barely get a scratch, but there was a touch of red in the front of the right corner of the bumper,

deep in the grooves of the texture, like someone had tried to clean the paint off and missed a spot. I was just reaching for my phone to snap a picture when my car started.

“Seems good to me,” Blake said. He turned off the engine and got out of the car, standing so that his arms rested on the roof and the top of the open door.

“Weird,” I said. “I swear, earlier it was going nowhere.”

He frowned, and I started to worry. Had he seen through me? “Wait a second,” he said, and I tensed, preparing to flee. “I know this car. Isn’t this the one that had its electrical system go totally on the fritz earlier this year, and then it just got better?”

I barely stopped myself from letting my sigh of relief be audible. “Yeah, this is the one. I guess there’s still a gremlin in the electrical system that goes away in the presence of a mechanic.”

“We never did find anything wrong with it, but I know it wasn’t working when we got it.” He shook his head. “Man, that was a crazy couple of days. The parts store was closed for the weather, and Eddie needed all the help he could get with so many tows and wrecks.”

He struck me as a little gruff, but not all that bad. Was this really the guy who’d run Tiffani and Tyler off the road? Maybe I was wrong and it was his brother-in-law who’d been driving the roadside assistance truck that night. The paint on the bumper made it likely it was one of them.

“Well, thanks for coming out,” I said. “What do I owe you?”

“Do you have a roadside assistance plan? We may be able to bill you through that. Let me get the paperwork.”

While he rummaged in his truck, I snapped a quick picture of the bumper with my phone. I still had my phone in my hand when a maroon pickup whipped in to the parking space on the other side of my car. I noticed that there was no “El Rio Development” sign on the door, but it was definitely Ryan Dobert who opened the door and got out. After slamming the door shut, he approached me, stalking menacingly. I backed up, heading toward the building.

“Why couldn’t you have minded your own business?” he demanded.

“I was doing my job,” I said, still backing. Surely if he was trying to salvage his reputation, he wouldn’t attack me in public in the middle of Main Street.

“We were going to cover it all, and now you’ve ruined it.” He slapped his hand against the hood of my car as he passed it, making a loud enough noise to make me jump.

“You didn’t have clear titles to that land,” I challenged. “How did you expect to sell it?”

“We had a plan. It was all worked out. But now they’re all going to want their land or their money.”

“You’ve got some nerve,” Blake said, approaching from my other side.

Great, I was trapped between a killer and a conman.

“You already took my land, so you can keep your hands off my truck,” Blake said to Ryan.

“Your land?” Ryan said with a sneer. “It was your wife’s grandparents’ land. Maybe you shouldn’t have been making your future plans based on her grandparents dying.”

“We have more right to it than you do. We’re family.”

“We bought it,” Ryan said.

“Not technically,” I said. “That’s going to be the tricky part to untangle, given that you sold it.”

“How do you know?” Blake asked.

“I’m Lexie Lincoln, with the *Gazette*. Can I get a statement from you about your wife’s family land being taken?” I hit the voice memo function on my phone and held it like I was doing an interview. With any luck, I’d capture a confession from at least one of them.

“You’re the one who wrote the newspaper story?” Blake asked.

“Yes, I did.”

“Then no charge for the roadside assistance call. I owe you one.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ryan said to me. “It was all on the up-and-up, nothing shady about it.”

“Is that why you hid behind your mother for your business instead of putting your name on it?” I asked. “Tyler’s wife gave me all the paperwork. She found quite the paper trail. Maybe you shouldn’t have hidden behind her business because she has access to everything. The police are already examining it all.”

“Wait, the guy was married?” Blake said with a laugh. “Tiff really could pick ’em.” That laugh made me want to punch him in the face, but I needed him on my side for the moment.

“If Tyler hadn’t gotten himself killed, everything would have been okay,” Ryan said.

I couldn’t resist watching Blake’s reaction to that. Would he gloat? Show signs of guilt? Something flickered across his face, but I couldn’t be sure what it meant. “Yeah, well, I guess something good came out of that, after all,” he said. “Karma. It was karma. Maybe you’ll be next.”

Okay, that might count as a threat, which might imply he’d also taken care of Tyler, but I didn’t think it counted as a confession. What could I ask that might get him to incriminate himself, without also making it clear that I knew? I’d learned the hard way that it was a bad idea to let a killer know that you’ve figured out that he’d killed.

Ryan must have seen it as a threat because he turned on the charm. I could actually feel him doing it as he held his hands up in a posture of surrender and turned his megawatt grin on Blake. For a moment, even I liked him. “Hey, easy, buddy,” he said. “No hard feelings. It was just business. Your wife’s grandparents wanted to sell. That land was a burden to them. We were doing them a favor.”

Blake was far too angry for the charm to have much effect. “You killed them! Or you might as well have. Emily’s granddad died as soon as he moved off that land, and then her grandma died a few months later, heartbroken after she realized she’d been

cheated. You conned them, like you were trying to con me just now. But your magic powers won't work on me."

He moved toward Ryan, and I was caught right between two men who were about to start throwing punches at any moment. "Hey, guys, maybe we should talk about this," I said. If they talked, I might get more of a confession. I thought Ryan had implicated himself, but I had nothing on Blake.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" Blake asked Ryan. "Rubbing it in some more?"

"Actually, I saw her and wanted her to know that I don't appreciate her interference." Ryan whirled on me and leaned in close, snarling, "I told you to stay out of my business. I will ruin you, I swear! I still have some influence around here. This'll never stick. You'll see, and you'll be out of town soon."

"Your victims are already calling the police," I said. "I think maybe it'll stick this time."

"I'll make damn sure it does," Blake said, moving even closer to Ryan.

I slipped out from between them. "I was just on my way to get some breakfast. Now, since my car's working again, if you'll excuse me . . ." I figured that once I was in my car, I'd be safe, and then I could drive away and call Wes. But I must have glanced at Blake's bumper as I moved toward my car, and he must have had a guilty conscience about it—or at least was hyperaware of it—because he reached out and caught my arm, keeping me from getting away. "You figured it out, didn't you?" he said, his voice cold and hard.

"Figured what out?" I asked. I tried to sound innocent, but it came out as scared, which made sense because I was.

"How did you know it was me? Even the cops didn't suspect me. They didn't question my alibi."

Things had just gone from bad to worse. Now I had two men who had good reason to be really angry with me, and one of them was a hothead who'd already killed two people in a fit of temper, intentionally or not. I'd ruined one's business, and I knew the other

was a killer.

I didn't think they'd do anything in the middle of downtown, but then again, rational thinking didn't seem to be Blake's strong suit. He might do something stupid and impulsive like kill me in broad daylight on Main Street. I looked across the street, but I didn't see Ruthie in her studio window. It was still a little early for her. Charlene would be at work soon, and Jean could tell her to call for help.

But I had to stay alive until then. I needed a diversion to get their attention away from me so I could run, and I figured my best hope was that they hated each other more than they hated me. "He's the one who killed your partner," I told Ryan. I figured that since Blake already suspected I knew, there was no point in my playing coy. "If it hadn't been for that, I never would have known about your scheme, and Tyler's wife wouldn't have had any reason to dig through her husband's records. You might have gotten away with it if Blake hadn't run Tyler and Tiffani off the road."

"It was you?" Ryan said, moving forward and raising his fist.

I winced and tried to duck. I hadn't considered that if they came to blows, I'd still be stuck between them.

"Hey, what's going on here?" I recognized Jordan's voice. He must have just come out of the coffee shop down the block. I didn't want to turn around to see him because I was afraid to take my eyes off the two men.

I noticed movement from across the street out of the corner of my eye, in the direction of Margarita's place. "Lexie, are you okay?" she called out.

The men didn't seem to have noticed that we had an audience, but I felt bolstered by the fact that I had friends nearby. I had someone to run to if I could get away. "He didn't just take your land and sell it for a lot more," I told Blake. "He didn't even really pay for it, just one down payment. Your wife's grandparents died of broken hearts after being cheated, and they didn't even get the money he promised. He played on their trust."

His grip tightened for a second, but I didn't think he was trying to hold me tighter. He'd tensed all over, like he was coiling up, preparing to spring. A moment later, he released me as he raised a fist to swing at Ryan. I dropped to the ground, glad I was wearing jeans so I didn't scuff my knees. I scrambled out of the way before getting to my feet and running down the sidewalk, away from the fight and right into the arms of Jordan and Margarita, who were running toward me.

"Blake did it," I said when I'd caught my breath. I was still panting a little, so my words came out in short gasps. "He's the one who ran Tiffani and Tyler off the road. He must have been driving his brother-in-law's truck."

"And we know what Ryan did," Jordan said, shooting a glare in the direction of the two men, who were engaged in an all-out brawl.

"We'd better call the police," Margarita said, already on her phone, but before she could complete the call, I heard a siren approaching. A police SUV pulled up and Wes got out, his hand on his gun. Another siren approached from the other direction, and more cops showed up.

Now that I was safe, I remembered that I was the newspaper editor, and this was probably going to be the biggest story of the week. I grabbed my phone, noticed that it was still recording, shut off the recording and started snapping pictures, moving so I could get a better angle of the brawling men with the cops surrounding them. "Everyone freeze!" Wes ordered. "You two, step back, away from each other. You're both under arrest for assault and battery, and there will likely be a lot more charges to come."

I took more pictures as the cops moved in to handcuff the two men. Ryan tried turning on his charm. "Now, officers, this isn't necessary," he said with a smile. "It's just a little dispute between men, no reason for the law to get involved." It looked like a couple of the cops might have been swayed because they hesitated, but Wes stepped in and turned him to face his truck. The other cops

snapped out of it and put on the handcuffs. Ryan then switched tactics. "He's the one you should be arresting!" he shouted. "He killed Tyler and Tiffani, ran them off the road because he was mad that his ex-wife was dating again."

"Yes, I know," Wes said mildly. "And you'll notice that he's being arrested, too."

The cops hauled the two men away, and Wes stepped to the front of the roadside assistance truck to check the bumper. "Yep, just as I thought," he said with a satisfied nod. He looked up and noticed me. "And, of course, you're here in the middle of it all."

"What did you expect?"

"Why do I have the feeling you're at least partially responsible for this incident?"

"Because you've met me?"

He gave me a slow grin and shook his head. "Yeah, that's it. Also, I saw your name in Eddie's log book as the most recent callout. What's up with that?"

"I had car trouble," I said with a shrug.

"Really?"

"Well, you wouldn't let me go with you to interview Eddie, so I figured it would be easier to bring him to me."

"But it wasn't Eddie."

"Yeah, I figured that out soon after I called. But how did you know?"

"Eddie tried to tell me that his alibi was that he was out on a call at that time, but he was Blake's alibi. Blake was supposedly working with him that whole evening. There was a callout for assistance on the River Road the evening of the accident in the log book. I suspect that when I call that customer, I'll find that Blake was the one who showed up. But when I saw your name in the book, I figured I'd better get over here."

"I had things under control," I said. "My friends were here to back me up." I didn't feel quite as well as I claimed, though. Now that the excitement was over, my legs had gone wobbly.

Charlene stepped out of the office door. "Is everyone okay?" she asked. "I saw the commotion and called the police."

"I told her to call the police," Jean corrected, passing through the front window. "I hope you thought to get photos. This'll be a great story."

"I'm fine," I told Charlene, ignoring Jean. "But I kind of need to sit down."

"Why don't we go to the coffee shop and get you some coffee?" Jordan said, placing a hand on my back to guide me.

"Ew, no," I said. "I don't do coffee, and their tea sucks."

"Really?" he asked, looking offended.

"Don't tell me you own that place."

"Well, yeah. What's wrong with the tea?"

"For one thing, it's tea bags. And not the good kind. For another, they just have an urn of hot water sitting around, and it's the wrong temperature for tea. So you get a paper cup of warmish water and a generic tea bag. Meanwhile, there are something like six varieties of gourmet coffee. It's like tea is a total afterthought. Tea drinkers are treated like second-class citizens."

"Okay, wow, I hadn't thought of that. I'd like to pick your brain on how we could improve."

"Not now, but you know where to find me. I will take one of the cinnamon rolls. They're pretty good."

"A cinnamon roll it is," he said before heading off.

"I have tea in the office," I said.

"I'll put the kettle on," Charlene said, going back inside.

Margarita walked me to the office, her arm around my shoulders for support.

Wes gave a snort. "He clearly hasn't been paying attention if he offered you coffee."

Chapter Eighteen

Tea and a cinnamon roll did a lot to revive me, though I was still a little shaky in the aftermath of all the excitement. I could be cool and calm in a crisis, but I paid for it after the fact with a delayed reaction. Wes told us not to go anywhere while he made some phone calls. He came back into the office a few minutes later.

“The customer verified that it was Blake who showed up to change a tire on the River Road that night. Blake must have come upon Tyler and Tiffani on his way out there, ran them off the road in a fit of rage, and then went on to the customer.” He got out his notebook and said, “So, what happened here?”

I drank some tea before answering to give myself time to organize my thoughts. “I guess I was a step ahead of you. As soon as you left, it occurred to me that if it was just about the land deal, Eddie would have gone after Ryan, too. But he hadn’t done anything about him, which meant it was even more personal than that, like, say, dating an ex-wife. I didn’t know who’d given Blake an alibi, but someone could have lied for him, and I knew he was prone to leaving his cell phone behind, so that didn’t mean anything. He could have been the one driving his brother-in-law’s truck.”

“And so you called for roadside assistance?”

“I’d already called. I didn’t count on it being Blake who showed up.”

“Lucky Lexie strikes again,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Hey, that knack comes in handy. And while he was here, Ryan pulled up. As you can imagine, he’s rather unhappy with me today. He confronted me about my story, and that got Blake riled up. They got into it—verbally, no blows yet—then Blake figured out that I’d guessed what he’d done, and he grabbed me. I instigated the fight between them as a diversion so I could get away. That’s pretty much it.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask how you instigated the fight.”

“I just made sure they each knew what the other had done to him. Blake had to release me to hit Ryan.”

“So there was also an assault on you?”

I shoved up my sleeve to show my upper arm, where there were still red marks from Blake’s grasp. I imagined they’d turn into bruises.

Wes shook his head. “You’ve got to find a new strategy for catching killers. Goading them into attacking you is a terrible idea.”

“That wasn’t my plan. I was just going to check the bumper and then call you. I figured I needed more than intuition to tell you Blake did it.”

“And did Ryan assault you in any way?”

“He never touched me, but he did approach me in a way that might be considered menacing. I don’t know if it was enough to count as assault.” I held up my phone. “I recorded a lot of the confrontation. No video, but I have audio of it.”

“We’ll have to get a copy of that recording,” Wes said, making a note. To Margarita and Jordan he said, “Does that fit with what you saw?”

“I wasn’t close enough to hear anything,” Margarita said. “I just noticed Lexie between two guys, and when I realized one of them was Ryan, I figured she might be in trouble.”

“Same here,” Jordan said. “I did see Blake grab her. That didn’t look good, so I came over.”

“Now, am I free to go?” I asked. “I was on my way to breakfast.

I was going to the diner to see if I'm still the town pariah. People should have read the article by now." In all the excitement, I'd almost forgotten that part. "You have my number, and you know where to find me."

"Yeah, go to breakfast," Wes said, shaking his head.

"I'll go with you," Margarita said. "Sometimes it's nice to be the customer, for a change."

"I can handle things here. You go get food," Charlene said. Margarita, Jordan, Wes, and I trooped out of the office, Wes getting in his SUV and Jordan heading across the street to Ruthie's gallery. Margarita and I walked to the diner at the end of downtown.

I was hoping merely to be able to walk into the restaurant and not be hit with glares, but the round of applause I got when I entered was even more than I could have expected. I was barely able to eat my omelet and biscuits while people approached to shake my hand and thank me for helping them or their family members or friends get back the land that had been stolen. I imagined these were mostly the same people who'd been calling Wes to complain about me harassing them when I made one phone call, but the turnaround was exactly what I'd wanted, so I withheld the snarky remarks and graciously accepted their praise. I seemed to have saved my job and my place in the town.

So, mission accomplished, but there was one thing left to do.

AS MARGARITA and I walked back from breakfast, I said, "We need to let Tiffani know what we learned."

"She's going to tell us she always knew Blake was bad news." She shook her head sadly. "I guess she never did get away from him, not entirely. I hate that. She did everything right. She got out of the marriage when he showed danger signs, she stayed away from that kind of man, and yet he still got her, years later. He

couldn't handle losing her to another man. I guess she was only safe while she wasn't dating."

"I think it was the combination of the land and the dating that set him off. He might not have minded as much if she hadn't been seeing the person he felt ripped him off. Not that I'm making excuses for him. He had no right to do what he did."

"Should we go out to the cemetery tonight? If we're going to be talking to a ghost, I'd rather be there after any other visitors are gone."

"Ghosts come out more readily just after sunset," I said. "And the last time I was there, Tiffani was starting to fade. It'll be easier for her at night. We should make a party of it—pack a picnic, maybe have some music, whatever she might enjoy."

"That's a great idea! I'm sure she'll like that." He expression grew more somber. "She might pass on after this, right? She'll have closure once she knows who killed her."

"A lot of that is up to her. It depends on how much she wants to hang on and whether she's willing to let go."

She wiped away a tear. "I don't know why the thought of her really being gone bothers me so much. It's not as though I can see or hear her. You could tell me she's still here, and I'd never know. I'm not sure I'd have believed you were seeing her if what you said didn't sound so much like her, when I know you never met her." She straightened her back and squared her shoulders. "Well, if she is going to go, let's give her a good send-off. Will it be a problem if we go late, after I close for the evening? I might be able to slip away early, depending on how crowded we are."

"It should be okay."

"Then I'll take care of snacks and tunes, since I run a restaurant and know her taste in music. Can you get a bottle of wine? Maybe something sparkly. You'll have to head to the next county. Just follow Main until it intersects with the state highway again, and there's a shop on the county line a little past that point."

"I do not get the liquor laws around here."

“We almost voted for a change in the last election, but some of the churches did a big ‘vote no or we’ll have winos in every doorway’ campaign. It might pass the next time around, since the pastor leading the campaign went to prison for embezzlement and his wife got arrested for burglary. That’ll take some of the wind out of their sails.”

I was glad it was my easy day at work, since the paper had gone out that morning and I had nearly a week until the next issue. I wrote up the events of the morning and transferred the photos from my phone. This was now three weeks in a row with real news for the front page, during what was supposed to be a slow time of year. Remembering the “may you live in interesting times” curse, I refrained from wishing to get four in a row. We all deserved a less interesting week.

When I had to make some phone calls, people actually took them, which was a pleasant change. “Back to normal,” I said to Charlene when I hung up after one call.

“Yeah, normal,” she said wryly, raising an eyebrow and tilting her head toward the ghost perched on the corner of my desk.

“Normal’s bad for business,” Jean said. “I wonder what else we can dig up. There have got to be more scandals around here.”

“I’m going to bask in the outcome from this one for a while,” I said, leaning back in my desk chair.

At lunchtime, I ran out to buy a bottle of champagne. Margarita wasn’t kidding about the shop being on the county line. They must have hired surveyors to be absolutely certain it was entirely in the right county while still being as close as possible. The shop was doing a brisk business on a Friday afternoon, and I wondered if its owners had been at all involved in the campaign to keep liquor sales out of Stirling Mills. They’d probably lose a lot of business if the town’s laws changed. I mentally filed that away as something to investigate.

When I got back, I came downstairs to the office after putting the wine in my refrigerator to find Wes sitting in my guest chair.

“Someone here to see you,” Charlene said. She stood and picked up her purse. “And now, if you don’t mind, I’m off.” We were pretty flexible about working hours on Fridays. It was the one day we could generally get away early.

“Have a great weekend,” I said.

I was pretty sure she winked at me on her way out the door.

“I guess you’re here for that audio file,” I said to Wes. “I uploaded it to my computer, and I can put it on an online drive for you to get.”

“Yeah, sure, that’ll be fine. But I was really stopping by to make sure you’re okay after this morning.”

A surge of warmth spread through me at the thought that he actually cared. Or was this just a cop follow-up thing, done out of duty? “I’m good,” I said. “I’m definitely going to have some bruises, but it all went about as well as I could have hoped. We got the guy who killed Tiffani, and we got even more against the guy who was ripping everyone off.” I waited for him to correct me about the “we” part, but he didn’t. “Oh, and does Lauren know about what happened to her husband?”

“I gave her a call,” he said.

“Good. I may check in on her later and see how she’s doing—and thank her for all her help. That story seems to have made a big difference. People are talking to me again. I even got applause in the diner.”

“You do seem to be the hero of the hour.”

“It’s amazing how quickly they went from saying I was harassing them for calling them to praising me for saving their land.”

“Ryan really does have a gift for making people believe in him. It’s hard to overcome that. I barely talked the chief out of just letting him go.”

Since Charlene was gone and he couldn’t see Jean—who had to know about his gift, since she knew his father, grandmother, and great-grandmother—I said, “Okay, be honest with me here, did you

really figure out it was Blake just by checking the log book?"

He turned pink and broke eye contact. "It was a little of both. When Eddie gave me his alibi, he thought about how I was sure to learn about Blake, and that was what made me ask for the log book. But you just figured it out by instinct—and luck."

"Luck and instinct won't hold up in court, which is why it's good that I'm the newspaper editor, not the cop."

"So now I guess there's some closure for Tiffani. She's not going to be happy about getting killed by her ex, years after she left him."

"Margarita and I are planning to go out to the cemetery tonight to tell her, maybe have a little party." Hoping Margarita wouldn't mind, I added, "You're welcome to join us. I don't know if it's going to be a send-off since I don't know if she's sticking around, but we're treating it as though it might be."

"Maybe. I may swing by. Tonight after Margarita shuts down for the evening?"

"Yeah. She may break away early, depending on how busy she is."

He got up. "Okay, then. Maybe I'll see you there."

I went to dinner at Margarita's that night, and things seemed back to normal. No one applauded when I entered, but I wasn't afraid to turn my back on the restaurant to eat. When the crowd dwindled, we headed out. I brought a cloth to sit on and set up candles, since that cemetery is really dark at night, with no lights in it. Margarita set up a Bluetooth speaker and started a playlist on her phone, filling the cemetery with peppy dance music. I tried to ignore the curious ghosts swarming around us as I helped set out the food.

"This is going to look weird if anyone sees us, like we're doing some kind of ritual," Margarita said.

"I told Wes—and invited him. I hope you don't mind," I said. "If anyone calls the police for suspicious activity, he'll know what's going on."

I started to worry when Tiffani didn't show up for a while. Had she already moved on? When she finally appeared, she was a lot more transparent, looking more ghostly than ever. Now it wouldn't take me a moment to know she was a ghost that not everyone could see rather than a living person. "Hey, a party!" she said. "And great tunes." She began dancing to the music.

"She's here, and she likes the music," I reported to Margarita.

"Hey, Tiff!" Margarita said, almost facing the right direction.

"Got any news for me?" Tiffani asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do," I said. "It was Blake who ran you off the road, driving his brother-in-law's roadside assistance truck. He was on his way to a customer when he saw you, and he got mad and rode your bumper. He wasn't trying to send you into the river."

"But he didn't do anything to help, either. Not that it would have made much difference. I think we were gone before anyone could have reached us. Still, he could have tried." She shook her head. "It figures. That's so much like him. I guess he got the last laugh. There was a time in my life when I was pretty sure he'd kill me, and then I got away, but he still got me."

"He's going to jail, if that makes you feel any better. I don't know exactly what the charges will be, but he is in trouble."

"Serves him right."

"You were the one who gave me the tip that led to catching him. Wes hadn't realized he was related to one of the land scam victims, and it seems his brother-in-law was his alibi, but when Wes started asking him questions, he claimed he was on a call, which was how he found out where Blake was at the time. And then there was paint that looks like it's from Tyler's car on his bumper."

"Well, good. Glad I could help. I wish you could tell him it was me."

"Maybe I can find a way."

Margarita, who'd been listening to what must have been a very

odd one-sided conversation, raised her glass and said, "To Tiffani! And to justice!"

"Oh, I wish I could drink some of that," Tiffani said with a sigh.

All of us turned in alarm when we saw headlights. I didn't recognize the Jeep that had pulled in to the cemetery, but I did recognize Wes when he opened the door and the dome light came on. I realized that I'd never seen his personal vehicle.

"You know, he turned out pretty well," Tiffani said. "If I'd known he was going to be so cute and get over the nerd phase, maybe I'd have looked at him instead of at that idiot Blake. And then maybe I'd still be alive."

I was a little alarmed at the burst of jealousy that hit me. I knew I found Wes kind of attractive, but was I really so possessive of him that I was jealous over what a dead person might have done more than a decade ago?

"Ladies," Wes said in greeting as he approached.

"Hi, glad you could make it," I said, probably a little too enthusiastically.

"Is Tiffani here?"

"Sure am, sweetie," Tiffani said, dancing around him.

"She is," I reported.

"Did you tell her about Blake?"

"Yeah."

"He ended up confessing to everything, just blabbed it all as soon as he got to the station. We may even get a guilty plea. Have you been haunting him?"

"I didn't know I could," she said. "I haven't gone anywhere but the cemetery."

I relayed that to Wes, who said, "Well, he's been having nightmares about you. It seems he actually feels guilty about it. Getting caught was a relief."

"Maybe I should feel bad for him, but I don't." A new song came on, and she said, "Oh, Margarita, you remembered! This is my jam! Come on, y'all, let's dance."

“Tiffani wants us to dance,” I said.

Margarita jumped up and began dancing. I got to my feet and stood awkwardly by Wes. Tiffani came up to us. “Dance!” she ordered.

“She’s pretty insistent about it,” I said sheepishly as I moved my feet a bit and swayed my shoulders. I was really surprised when Wes took my hand and spun me around. Soon, all of us were dancing and laughing. It was rather cathartic. I didn’t know how long we were out there, but when we’d run out of energy and were taking a break, Tiffani said, “I think I’m ready to go now. This was fun, but I don’t belong here anymore. I think there’s something better waiting for me.”

I found my eyes filling with tears as I relayed that to the others. “I’ll miss you so much,” Margarita said, openly crying now.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t have saved you,” Wes said.

“I wish I could have met you when you were alive,” I said.

“Thanks for everything,” Tiffani said. “Don’t forget about me.” She paused and added, “And tell Blake I forgive him. I don’t think I can carry any resentment where I’m going.”

I agreed and told the others, who also nodded.

“Well, bye then,” she said, giving us a little flutter of her fingers as she turned and walked away. It looked like there was an open doorway ahead of her with light spilling out of it. She grew fainter and fainter until she was gone, and then the door closed.

“She’s gone,” I said softly. Wes put one arm around my shoulders and his other around Margarita’s as Margarita sobbed. “I think that wherever she went, it was good.”

We took a moment of silence before Margarita stepped out from under Wes’s arm and sat on the cloth, then poured herself another glass of champagne. “Whew,” she said, draining the glass.

Wes didn’t move his arm, and I didn’t want to move away from him, so I stood there next to him, enjoying the proximity. “So, do we want to stay out here, or call it a night?” I said at last.

“Can we stay a little longer?” Margarita asked. “I’m not ready

to be alone right now.”

Wes finally moved his arm, and I tried not to sigh in disappointment. “Okay,” he said. “What snacks do you have?”

We joined Margarita for a midnight cemetery picnic, and I smiled because I was there with my friends.

LEXIE’S ADVENTURES continue in [Case of the Vanishing Visitor](#).

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